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Single Hand;

OR,

A LIFE FOR A LIFE.

BY W. J. HAMILTON,
AUTHOR OF "THE RED BROTHERHOOD," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

CAUGHT IN THE "NORTHER."

THE tempest was at its height, the furious rush of the "Norther," that scourge of the Texan plains. No one, unless he has faced its chilling breath, has any idea of the fearful danger which hangs over the unfortunate who is caught upon the plains when the cold wind is at its height. Great trees are upturned by its gigantic power, buildings are thrown down, and even the tough chaparral is leveled as the tremendous blast crushes over it. The air takes on a bluish tinge; the clouds hang low and the hitherto sultry air becomes all at once terribly frigid, the chill piercing to the very marrow.

Such was the scene upon which the tale opens, and two figures might have been seen lying under a wall of rocks upon the Texan border. Their horses, overcome by fear, crouched upon the earth beside them, emitting almost human moans of fear, while the men, wrapping their blankets about them, pressed as closely as possible to the rocks, striving to shield themselves from the chilling blast. Looking out upon the plain they could see frightened herds of animals of all descriptions joined in strange fellowship and flying before the pitiless blast. Buffaloes, various kinds of deer, wild cattle and mustangs, with almost countless groups of smaller animals, scurried here and there, the wind forcing them forward with pitiless power.

"This beats my time, Jack," said one of the crouching men—a handsome youngster of perhaps nineteen years of age. "It is a wonderful exhibition of the power of the Creator, who gave these countless herds this boundless plain to feed on."

"Don't be babyish, Ned Clayton," said the man called Jack, a rather rough-looking fellow in ranger dress, bearing the never-failing rifle pistols and bowie. "It don't sound well to hear one of our fellows turning mission-

"Look here, Jack," said the boy, drawing himself up to his full height, "you know my fighting weight and I would give you a word of caution."

"Oh, you needn't spur up at me because I happen to say a word you don't like, Ned," replied the other, drawing back a little. "Perhaps you could lick me and perhaps not; at any rate it won't do for us to quarrel; we have too much to lose."

"You need not remind me that I am bound hand and foot, and in the power of a merciless man, who takes advantage of an oath forced from me at the gallows-foot to make me do his dirty work."

"Do you want to draw back, Ned?" demanded the man, with sparkling eyes. "You know the penalty if you do."

"That for the penalty?" replied Clayton, snapping his fingers. "But for breaking a solemn oath you could not hold me for a single day."

"That's enough," growled Jack Evans, savagely. "Look at that tiger. He is worse skinned than the antelopes, the spotted cuss. I've a good mind to give him a ball."

The tiger, as the jaguar is called upon the Texan plains, flew by in the midst of a herd of antelopes, and so great was his fear of the storm that, for a time, his naturally bloody disposition was forgotten in his desire to escape. Ned came forward a little, holding on by a stunted shrub to keep himself erect, when a black mustang bounded wildly past, and, clinging to his mane and keeping her seat only by a desperate effort, was a beautiful girl not more than sixteen years of age. Ned had only a glimpse of a white beautiful face, golden hair floating out in the breath of the norther, and the look of terror in the heavenly blue eyes, when the mustang was out of sight rounding the point of the timber just in front.

"Did you see that, Jack Evans?" screamed Ned. "She will die in the storm if we do not give her help!"

"How are you going to give her help while the norther lasts?" replied Jack, coolly. "You'd better run after her; like enough you can keep up with the wind."

"Do you know that I should take pleasure in knocking you down, friend Jack?" said the boy, setting his teeth hard. "Curse you, don't drive me too far."

Jack Evans glanced at the broad shoulders and swelling muscles of his young companion, and wisely refrained from speaking a word to arouse his rage further.

"I didn't mean any thing, Ned," he said, humbly. "I know you'd like to help the girl and so would I. But look at those horses a moment. Do you think it probable that you could get them to move out in that norther? They are shivering with fear now."

Ned glanced at the trembling brutes and acknowledged, with a groan of despair, that they were useless now, but he might be able to follow on foot. He darted away with this intention but was thrown down breathless and forced to crawl back again to the shelter of the rocks.

"Now listen to me, Ned," said Jack Evans, as the boy lay sobbing upon the earth. "I know it's hard to see a pretty creature go that way, but, what can we do? Taint as if we had not done our best to save her, and just as soon as the storm breaks we'll follow her and perhaps we can be of some use yet."

"I beg your pardon, Jack," said the boy, rising



SINGLE HAND, THE TERRIBLE

on his elbow. "You've got a heart yet, and nearer right than I was, after all. Do you see any signs of a break, yet?"

"It won't last half an hour," replied Jack, looking at the sky. "You can see for yourself that it is lightening up to the northward, and we can start soon. Talk to the horses a little; you understand the brutes better than I do."

Ned crept to the side of his trembling horse and began to fondle him, and the animal ceased to quake with fear, and the light came into his eyes. Ned passed over to the other animal, and by skillful handling, soon got him over his fright, and if they shivered now it was not with fear.

"They are all right now, and will do any thing we ask of them," said Ned. "It is getting warmer, I think."

"I told you that we had got the worst of it," said Jack. "If I understand any thing, it is the Texan prairies. I'm a rough man, Ned, and have done many a wicked thing, in my time, but an innocent little creature like that can find the way to my heart quicker than any thing else on earth. Do you know why?"

"You must tell me, Jack."

"I had a little sister, once, with just such hair and eyes. I loved her better than any thing else on earth, and she died. I tell you, Ned, if that little child had lived, Jack Evans would not be an outlaw now, hunted for his scalp. At times I seem to see her face, and she's kept my hand from blood many a time. I wish she could do it always."

"Shake hands, Jack," cried the boy. "I'm proud to have you for a friend, and if we quarrel again, it won't be my fault, now that I know you."

"A man don't dare to let out the good in his heart among that truck yonder," replied Jack, with a motion of his hand toward the chaparral. "You know how it is, Ned—they'll say old Jack Evans is turning baby. I've thought a hundred times I'd shake them and go to the Nor'-west; but I love Texas, and they've got all I have in their hands."

"We'll talk about this another time, Jack. Don't you think we might venture out now?"

"Wait about five minutes, Ned. Here it comes again, and this is the last gust. It's an awful wind, the norther."

The blast swept by, carrying destruction in its path, and then suddenly ceased, and the atmosphere began to change. They looked to their girths, petted the horses a little, and sprung into the saddle, riding slowly out upon the trail. By good luck the black mustang had passed through the point of the timber, scattering the bushes in his course, and for this point they headed, and found bits of cloth fluttering upon the mesquit thorns, while a clearly-defined trail crossed the prairie toward the south.

"Forward," cried Ned, bending forward in the saddle, and fixing his eyes upon the trail; "we will save her yet."

CHAPTER II.

IN THE TREE-TOP.

FOR half an hour they rode in silence on each side of the trail, which luckily was not crossed by others, and they could keep up a good pace. The face of Ned Clayton wore a somber look, for he feared, at each roll in the prairie, to come upon the mangled form of the girl who had flitted by so strangely, caught in the north-er. Jack Evans said not a word, but his eyes were busy, and as roll after roll of the prairie was crossed, he began to hope.

"She's a plucky little darling, anyhow," he said at last. "How she hangs to that half-broken mustang!"

"If she can keep the saddle, there is some hope," replied Ned, with a sort of sob; "but the ground is getting awful rough."

The trail turned a little at this point, and headed for a thick growth of mesquit, about a mile in front. Jack paused; a look of wild terror came into his face, and he clutched at the pommel of his saddle for support. The look of deadly fear upon his face was reflected upon that of his young companion.

"What is it, Jack?" he said, in a sort of whisper.

"He heads for Deep Gulch. If she has gone down there, mortal help is of no avail. But ride—ride, for life or death."

They struck in their spurs to the very rowels, and darted on. The horses seemed to partake of their spirit, and the mile was passed over in less than two minutes, both mustangs going at the top of their speed, straining every nerve. They broke into the bushes, and pulled up on

the verge of a ravine so deep that the low pines which grew at the bottom scarcely touched the edge.

Ned Clayton started back with that look of horror frozen upon his face. In his wild prairie-life he had often seen men die—had braved death himself; but what was death in the heart of an Indian conflict compared with such a one as this? His strong muscles lost their strength, and he sunk to the earth weak as a child.

"Steady! This won't do, Ned," said Jack Evans, sternly. "Come, be a man."

The words nerved him and he sprung to his feet and approached the fatal verge and looked down. The branches of the trees beneath had been parted by the fall of a heavy body, but had risen again, concealing the earth beneath.

"I'm afraid it's all over, Ned," said Jack Evans. "It is forty feet to the ground, and if the trees did not break the fall—Will you go down, or shall I?"

"I'll go," replied Ned, eagerly. "I'm the best climber, by all odds, and if I need you, I'll sing out. Give me your lariat."

Jack took the dressed rawhide lariat from his saddle and passed it over to Clayton, who joined it to his own by the knot known as the double bowline, which could not jam or slip.

This done, he fastened one end of the rope about a tree and threw the other over the edge of the cliff, where it dangled within a few feet of the ground. Assisted by Jack, the boy swung himself over the verge, and went down the lariat, hand over hand with great rapidity, and, reaching the earth unhurt, parted the bushes and saw the mangled form of the black mustang lying upon the gnarled roots of the pine trees, crushed into a shapeless mass by the fall. His legs were broken, his neck doubled underneath his body and the skull crushed to a pomace. Exerting his utmost strength, the boy managed to thrust the body aside as he saw no trace of the beautiful girl. Where could she be if not beneath the fallen steed? A close search about the body revealed nothing, and Ned shouted to his companion above:

"The horse is here but the girl is nowhere to be seen."

As he spoke he glanced upward and saw something white and ghastly among the green leaves of a pine tree, thirty feet above his head. He uttered a cry of dismay. The girl was up the tree, but whether dead or alive he could not tell. Grasping the body of the tree, he ascended rapidly and reached the place where the white dress of the girl showed amid the foliage. As he came near he could see that she was senseless, and that there were spots of blood upon her dress. She had fallen upon a strong branch which tended upward, and had been thrown into a fork of the pine in such a way that even though dead it would have been impossible for her to fall. Ned pushed upward in a fever of excitement, fearing that she might fall before he could get to her, but he breathed more freely when he swung himself up to the limb by her side and looked down into the beautiful face.

"I never saw anything half so beautiful," he murmured. "Oh, Heaven, I hope she is not dead."

She was indeed beautiful—one of those rare creatures in whose face you can read spotless purity of heart. He gently disengaged her from the branches, raised her head a little, and could feel that she was warm, and placing his finger on her wrist decided that the pulse still beat.

"Alive, Jack!" he shouted, cheerfully. "Hurrah! Let us get her up out of this hole."

The tree stood close to the edge of the ravine, and Jack pushed out the lariat with a pole so that the boy could grasp it. Drawing it in quickly, Ned lashed it under the arms of the senseless girl in such a way that it could not slip.

"Take in the slack above, Jack," he said. "Carefully now; wait till I give the word."

He took the senseless form upon one arm and walked out far as he dared upon a stout limb, holding to one above him for support. Here he held her out until the cord was perpendicular and she could not strike against the wall, and then gave the signal to his friend above, who hauled away and soon had the light form of the girl safe upon the level, at the verge of the chasm. The rope was now let down for Ned, and he quickly stood upon solid earth, gazing with a strange fondness at the beautiful being he had saved.

"I tell you what it is, Jack," he whispered, "she is worth all the trouble we have had. She was alive when I took her up and I guess we can bring her around."

"Get some water," cried Jack, shortly.

"Don't stand fidgeting there, you young cub, unless you want her to die on our hands."

"Put some whisky on her lips and nostrils while I go for the water," said Ned, snatching the canteen from his saddle. "I'll put a girdle round the earth in forty minutes, for her sake."

"She is a nice girl," said Jack, uncorking the canteen and pouring a portion of its contents into his palm. "Away with you."

Ned hurried away while the older man stooped and bathed the pale lips of the fainting girl in the strong spirits. He had satisfied himself that she still lived and that no bones were broken, and bent over her fondly, his rough face showing a sympathy hardly to be looked for in one of his class. He was thinking of that sister whom he had lost so long ago—a child like this—and what he might have been had she lived.

The color began to steal back by imperceptible degrees into the pale cheek of the girl and she stirred a little just as Ned came back with the canteen of water.

"Fill the cup about two-thirds full and give it to me," he said. "She is coming to herself."

Ned obeyed orders and stood waiting anxiously, holding the cup, while the ranger bathed the face and neck of the maiden in the pure liquid which the boy had brought. Their perseverance had its reward, for she opened her eyes looking wildly at them.

"There, there, little 'un," said Jack, tenderly, "you are all right now, if you keep up a good heart. Give me the cup, Ned!"

He took it from the now trembling hand of the boy and poured in a little of the liquor. This done, he made her drink a little, and in a moment she was able to sit up, supported by the ranger.

"That's right, little 'un," said Jack. "Never say die while you have good friends on hand, eh? Drink a little more and get strong."

She obeyed with touching confidence, but was evidently in a maze of doubt, not knowing where she was. Her eyes passed from the dark face of Jack to the more youthful and handsome one of Ned Clayton, and a glimpse of remembrance came to her.

"I saw you under the rocks when I passed," she whispered. "I can recall little except the fearful storm, and that terrible ride across the prairie, and then I fell, and can remember nothing more."

"This youngster was for chasing after you in the 'norther,' but he couldn't go ten steps before he was down," said Jack, laughing.

"Thank you," said the girl, softly, "thank you very much. I know that I should have died but for you. Where did you find me? I know that I fell, that is all."

"I'll tell you as we ride back," said Jack, hurriedly, for he saw that Ned was about to show her the fearful danger from which she had been rescued. "Where did you live, little 'un?"

"My name is Lillian Hardin, and my father has a ranch down the river toward Stanleyville."

Jack cast a look of strange meaning at his young companion.

"Captain Hardin, do you mean?—the Ranger of the Rio Grande?"

"They give my father that name upon the river. Oh, gentlemen—"

"Hold on," said Jack. "I ain't a gentleman—fur from it. I'm a regular old Texican ranger, hide and hoof, and gentry and myself don't mix. Well, as my young friend Ned has business with your father, I guess we'd better toddle."

"Where is my horse?"

"B'leegeed to leave him," said Jack, shortly. "You'll ride behind me, and my mustang won't feel your weight no more'n a feather. Do you feel strong enough to ride now?"

She arose at once, but as she still seemed weak, the old ranger caught her in his arms and carried her quickly down the slope, while Ned took up the lariats, untied them, placed them on the horses, and led them through the bushes. They had just reached the edge of the chaparral, when the older ranger paused and held up his hand—a signal which the young man had too often seen not to understand. It meant danger. At a touch from Ned the horse stopped short and stood silent, while Ned stole gently forward and reached the side of his companion, who had sunk upon one knee, holding Lillian in his arms, and was peering through the bushes at a group of Comanches who stood beside their horses about three hundred yards from the cover. They were in their war-paint, gorgeous in serapes and feathers, and certainly were not pleasant neighbors for the small party in the bushes.

"The girl must be hidden," whispered Jack. "If them cusses strike our trail, they will follow like hounds on a scent. I know their nature, and it is p'izen to think how mean they can be. Meanness is their natural gait. It just suits them."

Lifting Lillian in his arms again, he began to search for a hiding-place. He found it at last—a sort of natural cavity in the face of the ravine, so overhung with bushes and vines as to completely conceal it from view. Telling her to remain quiet, and on no account to move unless she heard her name called, he hurried back to the spot where the boy was still watching for the coming of the Indians, who remained in the same position, conversing eagerly, and pointing now and then to the south. At a glance Jack had recognized the man who had led them, "Single Hand," a redoubted chief of the Comanches, a man who was known and feared for years along the Texan borders. He alone was mounted, a man of gigantic mold, with a face cut like a Roman cameo, a nose hooked like the beak of a vulture, and black eyes full of savage fire. The Western annals are full of tales of his prowess and savage deeds. He had dared to ride at the head of a thousand warriors through the streets of a Mexican city of forty thousand inhabitants, slaying as he went, and carrying off almost incalculable spoils. He had taken his share in a hundred fights with the rangers, and many a Texan family had cause to remember his name with sorrow. His dark hair, unpolluted by knife or shears, fell to his saddle, and upon his stately head he wore a tiara of many-colored feathers, giving him a strangely picturesque appearance. But this man, perfect in every other respect physically, had one defect. He had but one hand, and from this circumstance derived his name. Where his left hand should have been there was nothing except a round, bony protuberance, shaped somewhat like the head of an adder. He wore the peculiar dress of the Comanche chief, and over all was cast a gaudy *serape*, probably taken from some unfortunate Mexican who had crossed his track.

"I don't like the look of this, Fred," whispered Jack. "I don't think we are game to take care of twenty Comanche with Single Hand at their head. Why don't the mean cusses go on about their business, blast 'em?"

At this moment one of the younger warriors approached Single Hand and said something to him, pointing to the prairie not far away.

"Bet you forty dollars he sees our trail," groaned Jack. "See here; we've got to shin, out of Galilee, mighty quick, or we are done for. Lead the hosses back to the edge of the ravine and take off the lariats at the place where we went down."

Ned hurried back at once and Jack remained to watch. He saw that the Indians were scattered over the plain, studying the fresh trail, and from time to time pointing to the chaparral. At last, seeming to make up their minds, they made a sudden dash for the thicket—so quickly, indeed, that it was with the utmost difficulty Jack got back in time to avoid them. He found that Ned understood him and had already hung the lariats over the cliff and was waiting for him.

"Down with you, my lad," cried Jack. "Here they come, devil bent for election. Take your rifle."

They "slung" their rifles, pistols and ammunition, and slid down the rope into the tree and from thence to the ground, and found a cave which commanded the verge of the fissure, where they were out of sight. They had not done this a moment too soon, and their horses, which had fled at the approach of the Indians, were hardly out of sight, when the tufted head of a Comanche warrior appeared looking down into the ravine.

"The white men are not birds to fly through the air," said a commanding voice, speaking in the Comanche tongue. "They are hidden somewhere. Let my young men look for them, for we have been long upon the plains and have not taken one American scalp."

They could hear the Indians hurrying to and fro above them, and feared that they might discover the hiding-place of Lillian. But, from the place where they crouched, they could see that the hanging vines and bushes which concealed her were as yet undisturbed.

"The little 'un is smart, she is," whispered Jack. "If they don't find her, we can take our chances. Ha! the red nigger has found the lariat!"

It was but too true. The means of their descent was revealed, for it had been impossible for them to move it after going down. A wild yell from the Comanches announced their delight at the discovery.

CHAPTER III.

HIDE AND SEEK.

LILLIAN remained snugly ensconced in the nook in which she had been placed by the cautious ranger, listening with bated breath to the cries of the savages, and quaking with terror every time the footsteps came near her in the progress of the search. She had seen her two strange friends descend the ravine and knew that, for the present, they were safe, but was grieved that the desire to be of service to her had brought them into danger. She approached the opening and peered out without moving the leaves but could not see them, although the movement brought the lariat by which they had descended into view, and showed her that an Indian had already commenced the descent and that others were waiting to follow.

"Are they blind or have they found some way of escape, that they make no sign?" she muttered. The idea was no sooner formed than it was answered, for the sudden discharge of two rifles, so nearly at the same moment that it seemed like one report, sounded through the glen. The savage upon the rope released his hold and fell into the ravine with a loud crash as the branches broke beneath him, and another who stood upon the cliff fell dead in his tracks. This sudden attack surprised the Indians, who at once dropped behind the rocks, while a hoarse cry of triumph came from below.

A strange battle now commenced about the ravine. The moment the two besieged men had fired they shifted their ground a little, while the bullets and arrows of the Indians rattled through the leaves into the spot over which the smoke of the rifles arose. They lay sheltered beneath a great pine, the trailing branches of which swept the ground, and whenever an Indian dared show his head above the ledge it became the mark of a bullet. Both Ned Clayton and Jack Evans were finished marksmen, and were not likely to miss their aim at that distance, and they soon made this evident to the Indians, who had four killed and as many wounded when they withdrew to consult.

"They'll make it warm for us yet, Ned," said Jack, in a low tone. "We must shin out of this somehow."

"And leave Lillian!" cried Ned, indignantly. "I'll never do it."

"Can't we come back, you obstreperous young varmint?" whispered Jack. "I ain't more likely to leave her than you are."

"All right; don't let your angry passions rise, Jack, for I'm sure I did not mean any harm, so lead the way. But, hold on; we ought to give her some kind of a signal to show her that we mean to come back."

"Can't be done, boy; she will stay until we return; you may bet on that. Come on."

There was little time to lose, for already half a dozen lariats were hanging over the sides of the ravine, and the Indians were preparing to descend. Stooping low and keeping under the shadow of the gloomy piles, they darted away up the ravine, moving cautiously, though swiftly. The bottom of the ravine was of the hardest rock, and to trail them would be impossible. For half a mile there was no break in the gulch-wall, but at last they reached a place where an irregular cleft ran upward upon the side opposite the cavity in which Lillian lay concealed. They climbed up hastily and reached the top, and at once turned back toward the place which they had just left, keeping out of sight behind the bushes. The frantic cries which they heard below them, convinced them that the Indians were again at fault. Looking into the ravine, Ned saw them hurrying wildly about, seeking vainly for some trace of the fugitives.

"They'll have to give it up, Jack," chuckled the boy. "If we only had Lillian with us now, we could leave them alone in their glory."

"I didn't like to risk it," said Jack Evans. "They are mean cusses, and the gal is perfectly safe where I left her if she don't get impatient and show herself before the time. Keep dark, now; them Kimanche would start at the rustle of a leaf."

They stole on cautiously, and reached the point at which they aimed, just opposite the hiding-place of Lillian. Here they found a shelter and lay down to watch. From this cover they could see that only eight or ten of the savages had gone into the ravine, and that the rest were standing in a group above the immovable figure of Single Hand, upon the verge of the cleft, watching the proceedings of their companions below, with intense interest.

One of the savages in his search happened to pass near the face of the rock which was the hiding-place of Lillian. He paused suddenly and pick-

ed up something which lay upon the earth, and looked at it closely. It was nothing except a small twig, covered with green leaves, but these readers of nature become perfect in their art by studying the trivialities which others would pass by in contempt.

Where did the twig come from? It was green, had not been broken from the parent stem more than half an hour. How then did it come here, since none of his companions had passed the spot? These were the questions which forced themselves upon the mind of the savage. He stepped back a pace or two, intently examining the face of the cliff for a solution of the question, and his eye brightened as it lighted upon the bushes which hung over Lillian's place of concealment, for he saw that other twigs were bent and broken and that some had been arranged in too artistic a manner.

An Indian does not readily follow a false scent, nor does he like to raise a false alarm, lest he incur the ridicule of his companions. This man was an old warrior, and had much to lose if he misled his companions, so he threw down the twig and walked deliberately back to one of the lariats which hung over the cliff, and commenced the ascent.

"Now what is that red thief after?" whispered Jack, who had been watching his movements, uneasily, for some moments. "He means mischief, I am afraid."

"Shall I give it to him?" demanded Ned, eagerly throwing forward his rifle.

"No, hold on," replied Jack. "I don't want to let them know that we are here until we are forced to do it. Let him go up."

It would have been better if Ned had followed his first impulse, for the man did mean mischief. He struggled to the top of the cliff and was helped up by those who remained with the chief.

"Why does Nemona come here?" said Single Hand. "Has he seen something from below?"

"Nemona has seen something," replied the warrior. "He does not know whether it is a good sign or a false one, but will go and see."

He stalked away alone, and a moment afterward appeared upon the summit of the cliff, directly above the spot where Lillian lay. Then Jack Evans saw too late that he had been wrong in suffering the Indian to escape so long, and as he bent down to thrust aside the bushes, the ranger raised his rifle and fired, and Nemona, without a cry, fell from his perch into the ravine below.

"That comes of being too cussed inquisitive," roared Jack. "Give it to the others, my boy."

Ned fired, and had the satisfaction of creating a decided disturbance in the group about Single Hand. One man dropped in his tracks, shot through the heart, and the bullet passing completely through his body, wounded the great chief slightly in the wrist. In an instant the place was deserted, not an Indian remaining in sight, either upon the cliff or in the ravine below.

"We'll guard that spot," cried Jack. "Let me see the red nigger that dares to put a finger upon those bushes while I am here to watch."

The Indians down in the ravine were in a tight place. They had the highest respect for the aim of the rangers, and knew that it would be very unhealthy for them to show hand or foot while the whites were on the watch. It was an awkward predicament, and Single Hand began to be very doubtful whether any thing was to be made out of this obstinately valiant pair.

The two had reloaded their rifles and were on the watch for any second attempt to approach Lillian's hiding-place. Single Hand was acute enough to see that something was concealed near the spot where Nemona had met his fate which the rangers desired to defend, and he was equally determined to find what this hidden treasure might be. Creeping up to the edge of the ravine, he shouted an order to his men below in the Indian tongue, and Jack Evans began to look blue.

"We have got to git," he said. "Did you hear what he said?"

"Don't know the Comanche tongue," replied Ned. "What did he say?"

"He ordered them to go up the ravine, find a place to climb up, and take us in the rear."

"Don't let us run, for God's sake, Jack," pleaded Ned. "I can't leave her that way."

"We'll only get chawed up if we stay," said Jack. "Let me think it over. I have it—come with me."

He slung his rifle and darted into the chaparral, closely followed by Ned Clayton, and making a circuit, approached the cleft where they had come up from the ravine. Here they lay

down and waited, and shortly after the Indians who had been in the ravine came out of the cleft, and striking their trail above, followed it swiftly southward. The moment their forms were concealed by the branches, Jack arose, laughing, and the two went down the cleft into the ravine.

"That was well done, Jack," said the delighted boy. "I don't know that we can help her, anyhow, but I want to see the last of it and know which way they take her, and then we can see the captain and tell him what to do."

They crept in silence until they had passed the place where they had previously been concealed, ere the savages could complete the circle which they would doubtless make before they rushed in upon the empty nest. Again they concealed themselves and awaited further developments.

"We are playing this game of hide-and-seek pretty fine, Ned, my boy," said Evans, "but it can't last forever, and they will get round us sure. If I can get a crack at Single Hand now, his loping will be at an end, for I'll mark him down certain."

The savages who had come up from the ravine gathered in cautiously, and made their rush, yelling like demons, but they stopped in blank dismay as they found the birds flown. Their cries of triumph changed to quavers of surprise, and then one of them shouted the unwelcome tidings to the chief.

"Which way have they gone," shouted Single Hand, without showing himself.

"The trail leads towards the setting sun," replied the warrior who had spoken.

"They heard the words of Single Hand when he told you what to do, and have fled," said the chief. "Let the warriors return and we will go on our way. This has been a bad trail for the sons of the Comanche."

"Bet your life it has," muttered Jack. "Ain't it high, Ned, the way we have fooled the mean sharks?"

"But they will get Lillian, now, and it seems hard after what we have done."

"We can't do any more. If we fire at them now when they show themselves, these other blackguards behind will come down on us like a flood, and we can help her more if we keep shady than we could after they had raised our hair. It isn't a very big party, anyhow, and I'll bet my last picayune we get her away from them in less than two days, if we only lay low and keep dark till the imps leave. What do you say?"

"I suppose you are right," said Ned, "but it grinds me terribly to let them beat us, after all."

"They've lost some scalps trying it on," said Jack, "and that don't set very well on their stomachs. Quiet now, for your life."

Two savage warriors approached the place which the whites had defended so long, and thrust aside the bushes. Jack Evans groaned, and Ned covered his face with his hands, for he did not wish to witness the capture of Lillian. But a low exclamation from Jack caused him to look up, and he saw that, as the Indians had torn away the bushes from the cavity, it was empty.

"Oh, wouldn't I like to yell now?" hissed Jack, below his breath. "Wouldn't I like to scream like a painter? That gal has tricked them, as sure as you are born."

The Indians were at a stand-still. It must be remembered that they were not certain that the cavity contained any one, but were led to think so by the obstinacy with which the whites resisted any approach to the spot. Now that they saw it was empty they did not know what to think. If there had been a trail, it had been obliterated by their feet, and for the present, Lillian, wherever she might be, was safe.

"Oh, how I want to yell," muttered Jack. "Smart? It ain't a name for it. She's the cutest girl in Texas. Hush! here come our friends from the other side."

The warriors now appeared and were assisted up the cliff by their friends, and for awhile the murmur of voices could be heard above them. The whites remained quiet, waiting for their enemies to decamp, which they at last reluctantly did, full of rage at their loss. As usual in such cases where it is possible they carried off the bodies of their slain friends, and as the sound of retreating hoofs could be heard the old ranger leaped to his feet.

"Glory hallelujah! They are off and they ain't got the girl! Now, then, let us try to find her."

They scrambled up the side of the ravine, aided by one of the lariats which had been left behind. As they reached the crest Jack hurried

out to the edge of the chaparral and looked after the Indians, and saw that they were nearly a mile away, riding swiftly across the great plain. They had evidently given up all hope of revenge, at least for the present.

"All right, Ned," cried Jack. "Call her and see if she answers."

Ned whistled and called Lillian by her name. A merry laugh was the reply, and, as it seemed to come almost from the earth beneath, he looked down and saw the piquant face of Lillian peeping up from among the branches of a low pine near the edge of the ravine. As is often the case with these trees the lower branches touched the ground, forming underneath a splendid hiding-place.

"Hurrah!" cried Ned. "Here she is, the size of life! Come out of that, you little witch!"

He assisted her to get out of her hiding-place and receive the warm greeting of Jack Evans, who was delighted beyond measure at her escape. After the Indians in the ravine had moved away, and satisfied that the Comanches would soon force her friends to decamp, she had crept out of her hiding-place while the red-skins were creeping out of sight of the never-failing rifles and forced her way under the pine branches. By good fortune this movement did not attract the attention of the enemy.

"All right so far," said Jack. "Now, then, let us look for the hosses."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MEETING—PEDRO'S TASK.

The horses had only run a short distance, and, being well-trained, the shrill whistle of Ned Clayton quickly brought them to the spot. After looking carefully across the prairie and ascertaining the general direction taken by the Comanches, they rode off at a right-angle with the course of their enemies, and put the horses along at a good pace. Lillian rode behind Jack Evans, whose strong horse did not seem to feel her additional weight, and carried them nobly. Half an hour later, as they crossed a roll in the prairie, they saw a strong party of horsemen, far in front, halted for a moment upon the green prairie.

"Who is that?" cried Jack, sharply. "Do you make them out, Ned?"

"Rangers," replied the boy, in a short, quick tone. "We have nothing to fear from them."

The rangers had sighted them at the same moment, and at a word from their leader those who had dismounted sprung again into the saddle, and the whole band darted toward them. As they came nearer, Lillian uttered a cry of joy and stretched out her hands toward a handsome, middle-aged man who rode at the head of the troop. A wild cheer went up from the entire party as they put their horses to the gallop and quickly surrounded our two friends, while the leader caught Lillian in his arms and clasped her to his breast.

"My child, my child, my darling Lilly! where have you been? If you only knew all that we have suffered on your account."

"I am sorry I went away, father," replied Lillian, "but I went for a ride, and when the storm came on Vesuvius ran away with me. You must thank these kind friends, dear father, for but for them I should be dead, or at least a prisoner of the Comanches."

Captain Hardin turned to Jack Evans and extended his hand.

"Take it," he said. "It is the hand of an honest man and true Texan, and I swear faith to you and yours while I give it. The time may come when I may be of service to you and I shall not forget you."

"You don't want to give me too much praise," said Jack. "This youngster had more to do with it than I did, and would have followed her through the north if he could."

The captain shook hands heartily with Ned, and was evidently taken with his handsome, ingenuous face.

"We shall be great friends," he said, heartily. "Get Lilly's horse, Staples. Gentlemen, you must come with me and accept my hospitality for a time, for we cannot part until we know each other better."

Ned was looking over the ranger band and thought he had never seen so strange a party. Men of all ages—youth, manhood and men with gray hair—composed it, but upon every face was imprinted that reckless disregard of personal danger so peculiar to the prairie-men. All were well armed, though there was little regularity in their style of dress, and each carried a lasso coiled to his saddle-bow.

"What was it the gal said 'bout the Kimmman-

che, stranger?" said a grizzly old ranger, named Prairie Joe. "That kind o' interests me, that does."

"We were attacked in Deep Gulch by about twenty of them under Single Hand. We rubbed out some and the rest gave it up as a bad job and left."

"Kimmmanche? Single Hand? I hope you hear that, Cap."

"I hear," said Hardin, who was talking fondly with his daughter. "Don't be afraid, Joe. If Single Hand has dared to come so near the station we will make him repent it, but not now."

"I'm afeard he'll get away," grumbled Joe.

"It is only a short hour's ride to the ranch, Joe, and my wife will be in torment until I bring Lilly back."

"That's so," said Joe, "but couldn't you let me take 'bout twenty men and foller up Single Hand? I'm literally spilin' for a fight, Cap, and old Single Hand has a grudge to settle with me, you know."

"Just as you like, Joe; only promise me not to follow too far nor make an attack before you know their strength."

"Good enuff. Will you go with me, stranger, and kind o' point out the way?"

Jack readily agreed to this proposition, and Ned would have accompanied him, but Captain Hardin and Lilly pressed him to go with them to the ranch, and he consented. Old Joe and his party rode away in pursuit of Single Hand, and the captain, followed by ten men, turned again to the south. Lilly rode between her father and Ned, chatting in a gay tone and giving an account of her adventures.

"Young man," said the captain, "the more I hear of this affair the more I am convinced that you have been of the greatest service to me, seek to disguise it as you may. I am not a person of many words, but I trust that my acts may speak for me."

Some inexplicable emotion was visible in the noble face of Ned Clayton. He seemed to hesitate to take the hand of Captain Hardin, but, impelled by a power he could not control, he struck his hand forcibly into the extended palm of the captain.

"Agreed," he said. "I will be your friend to the death."

"Why, my young friend, I hope there is nothing in my face which you do not like."

"No, no," cried Ned, "far from that, but I—Heavens! if I could only explain to you why I hesitated. If I only could do that, you would understand the position in which I am placed. But, I agreed to stand by you, and I'll do it, though the devil stand at the door."

The captain looked somewhat surprised at the seemingly unwarrantable heat of the young man, but said nothing, and they rode on in silence for some distance, when Lillian broke the quiet by a merry laugh.

"This is a Quaker meeting; no one speaks until the spirit moves," she cried. "Father, I must ask you how you are going to manage it that my friends can stay with us always?"

"Umph!" said the captain. "I will attend to that, in some way. You ride well, young man—excuse me—may I call you by your first name?"

"Every one calls me Ned," replied the youngster. "What were you going to say?"

"I was going to ask if you could break horses."

"I can do that against any man in Texas," replied Ned, eagerly. "You anticipate my wish to stay with you, but, understand that I should refuse to stay as a dependent upon your bounty. Give me work and I am your man."

"We will see what can be done, Ned," said the captain, kindly. "Does that satisfy you, Lilly?"

"Any thing which will keep Ned with us. I warn you that I shall be exacting, and when I order you to come, there is nothing for you to do but obey, Master Ned."

"I am your slave," said Ned, laughing, and thoughtlessly adding a quotation from a Latin poet. Captain Hardin looked at him quickly.

"You have an education then, my boy?"

Ned blushed as he replied: "My education is such as may be picked up from a dissolute man who had it in his power to make himself a high place in the nation, but who by wild excess and a lawless life has made himself an outcast. Don't ask me to speak of that, Captain Hardin. It is a sealed book to every one."

"I will not press you, my, boy," said the captain, heartily, "but I am glad you have an education, for you will enjoy my library all the more. I suppose a wild captain of rangers

ought to apologize for liking the ancient poets, but it is so. That is one of my stock ranches."

They passed a number of rudely-built huts, with a large corral near at hand which was full of cattle. A number of Mexican half-breeds were loitering about in the sun, who became intensely active when the horsemen appeared.

"That is the way the villains act," said Hardin. "I've got an overseer who will do any thing rather than force his countrymen to work, and it is simply impossible for us to get on together. Here, Enriquez, where is Pedro Gonzales?"

"He is at the next horse corral, Senor Capitano," replied the man. "Shall I run ahead and tell him that you are coming?"

"Oh, no, my good friend. You need not take all that trouble."

"No trouble at all, senor," said the man, eagerly. "I will make haste."

"You may stay where you are, Enriquez. We are riding that way, and will see him ourselves."

The man looked disappointed, and drew back, with a muttered oath, and the party rode on. They passed through a ravine between low hills, and came suddenly upon the horse corral, where they found the man they sought, crouching upon the greensward in front of the corral, playing cards with two disreputable-looking ruffians, in the rude dress of the prairie. So absorbed were they in their game, that they did not hear the sound of the coming hoofs until the horsemen were almost upon them.

"Hip-hurrah!" cried one of the strange men. "I'll have all your share if this thing goes on. There's an ace for you, bully boy."

"You are having a good game, Pedro," said Captain Hardin. "Now tell me who these fine fellows are, and by what right you are wasting the time for which I pay you?"

Pedro bounded to his feet, in great astonishment, while the two men quietly appropriated the money which lay upon the sward. Was it a mistake, or was there something in their manner which showed that they were not unknown to Ned Clayton? They seemed to look him over as a stranger, it is true; yet in the mind of Lilly there was a half-formed thought that they recognized him.

"Don't get wrathful, captain," said one of the men. "You see, we've come in from the Santa Fe trail, and the greaser wanted a game, and we thought we'd humor him. No offense, I hope?"

"I don't allow men to hang about my corrals who can not give a good account of themselves."

"We was thinking to join the rangers, captain," said the man.

"It seems to me that, for men that have just come from the Santa Fe trail, you know a great deal about us here."

"Lord love you, captain, do you s'pose that there is a man in Texas that don't know the Rangers of the Rio? We want to jine, and kin fight, too," added the other man.

"No one joins my company who is not vouched for by some of the members. If you can find any rangers who will say that you are good and true men, you can come in."

"But, captain, ain't that a little hard? We are strangers to your men—"

"Then I don't want you, boys. Live around here a year, and let me see that you are the right sort, and we will take you in."

"You seem mighty particular," said the man, with a covert sneer. "Come, Jim, get the horses and let's toddle."

"Wait a moment," said Hardin, who was looking at them sharply. "Do you happen to know a man named Tom Duke?"

The fellow started, but recovered himself instantly, with a look of surprise on his face.

"Do you say Duke, captain?"

"Yes."

"I can't say I know him, captain. I have heard that he is a mighty hard man and makes a heap of trouble round here, but I don't know him."

"He is suspected of being in league with the horse-thieves who infest this section. If you should meet him, say to him that Captain Hardin, of the Rio Rangers, will hang him before the year is up."

"I ain't likely to meet him, Cap," said the fellow, with a furtive glance at the immovable face of Ned Clayton; "but if I do, I'll be sure to tell him what you say. He's got heaps of friends in Texas, I've heard."

"He has many accomplices, some of them high in power. They steal negroes and horses, and have been holding high carnival in Texas, but I'll have them yet."

"I wouldn't be surprised if you did, Cap, but

if I was you, I wouldn't send that word to Tom Duke."

"And why not?"

"Because such a thing mout happen as for him to ketch you, and likely he'd make it warm for you. Hyar's our hosses. Good-by, Cap—I wish you'd take us in the rangers?"

Hardin shook his head, and they rode away at a sound pace, never looking behind them, and the captain turned upon his overseer, who was waiting for his share of the captain's anger.

"Now, Pedro, it is your turn. You know who those scoundrels are, and I must know, too."

"Pardon, Senor Capitano," said the man, sullenly, "but I know nothing about them."

He was a dark-faced fellow, in the gaudy dress of the Mexican of middle rank, rather fine-looking, but with an evil eye.

"That is as much as to say that you won't tell me who the men are, eh? We will see about that, by-and-by. In the meantime, I am going to put you to the test, and see whether you are as good a horse-breaker as you claim to be. Here, half a dozen of you go and bring out that bucking phenomenon—the black with the star mark."

"What are you going to ask me to do, capitano?" said Pedro.

"You are going to ride him. If you do it, all right; I will give you a place still. If you fail, I want another breaker."

Half a dozen greasers came out of a small corral, leading a magnificent sixteen-hand black, with a wicked eye. He had suffered them to put the saddle and bridle on him, and seemed to await developments.

"Can you ride that horse, Ned?" whispered Lillian.

"I can ride any horse," replied Ned, calmly.

"Set the greaser at work, captain."

"Ride him," said the captain, pointing to the horse. "You know what it means if you fail."

CHAPTER V.

HORSE-BREAKING—THE COLPORTEUR.

It was evident that the fellow did not like the job. The Mexicans are good riders—perhaps, as a class, the best in the world, and he had been trained in the saddle from boyhood; but there was something too meek and humble about this animal, which he did not like. Such angelic quietude meant mischief, and the man approached the horse slowly from in front. The animal began to swing slowly around, as if upon a pivot, always presenting those threatening heels to the enemy, but never offering to kick, because he knew that this would be powder wasted while the Mexican kept so far out of reach.

Pedro hissed out a lurid Mexican oath and ran in, and before the horse could strike, he was in the saddle.

The horse gave one frantic leap, which sent the Mexican flying out into space, clearing the air like a thunderbolt, and then settled down upon his feet again with indescribable meekness upon his front. Pedro rolled over twice before he could recover himself, and made a curious figure; but he was on his feet in an instant, and again in the saddle, and actually got one foot in the stirrup before the horse could "kick" again.

But this only brought out new tactics in this versatile beast. Darting suddenly forward at full speed for twenty yards, he stopped as suddenly, planted his fore-feet and lowered his head. Away went Pedro out of the saddle, alighting upon his head and shoulders with stunning force.

The horse was now literally wild. Striking right and left at all who opposed him, he rushed furiously at the prostrate Mexican, and it would have fared badly with him but that Ned Clayton bounded from the saddle and stopped him in full career, and, to the surprised of all, the youngster was in the saddle and firmly seated before the horse could do any thing to baffle him.

"Clear the way, all of you," cried Ned, waving his hand. "I'll break or kill him, one or the other. Back, I say!"

The Mexicans willingly stood aside, and a battle royal now began between man and horse. The mustang and half-bred horse of Texas is imitable in the trick of "bucking." That is, he will leap into the air at least two feet and come down with his legs stiff, giving the rider a shock which will either unseat him from the saddle, or give him a blow that will half stun him.

This particular horse was an adept in the exercise; but Ned was up to the trick, and the moment the horse began to "buck," he slipped his feet out of the stirrups and fastened his spurs in the heavy saddle-cloth. As the horse leaped,

he would rise a little in the saddle, and come down easily when the animal struck the ground, with a smile on his face.

"He'll get sick of that exercise after a while," said the young man, as the horse bucked again.

After bucking three or four times without avail, the horse stopped and seemed to hesitate before trying a new trick. Then he darted out as before, and tried to dispossess himself of his obstinate rider, but Ned was on the watch and kept his equilibrium by leaning back in the saddle. Up to this time Ned had kept the snaffle and had not attempted to use the curb, but took it up now as the horse showed a disposition to rear.

The Mexican bit is a cruel thing, and a heavy hand upon a curb will quickly cure the most obstinate horse of rearing. With the curb in his left hand, Ned lifted his heavy riding-whip, and began to rain blow after blow upon the wild steed. Again and again he tried to rear; but kept down by the iron hand upon the curb, it was of no avail. Then he tried the last of his accomplishments—falling suddenly to the ground, and endeavoring to roll upon his rider.

As he fell, Lillian uttered a cry of fear, but her alarm was dispelled as she saw that Ned had cleared his feet from the cloth, and was standing over the horse, laughing. The animal leaped up again, but only to find his rider fixed as firmly as ever upon his back. Then Ned sent the spurs into the sides of the now wild horse, and started him at a furious run across the plain, and out of sight behind the horse corral.

Five minutes passed, when the thunder of hoofs was heard again, and Ned came back at a mad gallop, his rowels red with gore, and the foam flecking the sides of the conquered beast. He was sitting easily in the saddle, no longer using whip or spur, and holding the snaffle lightly in his hand.

To show them that he was completely successful, he put the horse through his paces, making him trot, canter or gallop at will, and then brought him back to the astonished party.

"Here he is captain," he said. "After I have trained him to stand the flapping of a woman's riding-habit, your daughter can ride him with safety; but he is the beau ideal of a ranger's horse."

"He is yours, Ned," replied the captain. "The man who has conquered him has the best right to own him."

"But, captain, he is a very valuable animal, and—"

"You won't refuse him if I give him to you," said Lillian. "You must take him, or I shall think you do not care to have saved my life."

"I accept," said Ned, hanging his head; "I am not worthy to accept favors from you, or any other good man or woman, but I will be; I will labor to make myself better, and to-day begin a new life."

"Verily, the young man rides like unto a warrior of old times," said a snuffing voice; "and it does my heart good to hear him promise to begin a new life."

They all turned in surprise and looked at the speaker. He was a tall, high-shouldered man, mounted upon a sorry-looking Mexican "plug," with huge saddle-bags, stuffed to repletion on each side.

His face was like that of one of Cromwell's hard riders, and his long flaxen hair hung uncut to his shoulders. The plainly-cut black clothes, the huge saddle-bags and sanctified air, bespoke one of the colporteurs who traveled over the new States and Territories in their earlier days.

Ned looked at him in astonishment, and for a moment seemed absolutely horrified; but recovered himself in a moment.

"Ah," said Captain Hardin. "A colporteur, I presume."

"I am an unworthy member of the fold, seeking to pluck the brands from the burning."

"Well, you've got a good field of labor here, sir," said Hardin, smiling slightly. "The boys shall listen to you; I promise that much at the least. If you will go on half a mile you will find my ranch, and are welcome to make it your head-quarters while you stay in this section."

The colporteur rode on after giving thanks, and Hardin looked after him disapprovingly.

"I don't like his looks," he said. "I have entertained many of these men in my time, and most of them were noble-hearted gentlemen, who had given their lives to a great and laborious work, but this fellow looks like a hypocrite. What is your opinion of him, Ned?"

Clayton started, for he had been wrapped in deep thought.

"I—did you speak to me?" he faltered.

"I asked you what you thought of the colporteur?"

"A hypocrite!" replied Ned. "A wolf in sheep's clothing. Better trust the most treacherous Mexican on earth than that man."

"You only speak my own thoughts, Ned. Pedro Gonzalez, I have no further need of your services, as Mr. Edward Clayton will act as my overseer. You can go."

"I am to be superseded by this cursed American there?" hissed Pedro.

"You heard what I said? You have already taken up a month's pay in advance, but that you may not go out penniless there are two doubloons. Let us part good friends, but your associates are bad, and I will have no man about me whom I cannot trust."

"I will have your heart's blood for this, young sir," hissed Pedro, coming close to Ned. "Bear that in mind."

"Pshaw," replied Ned. "Get out of my way or I will help you."

But the Mexican planted himself in the road and heaped a torrent of invective upon the young man, who stood it for some moments calmly.

"Once for all," he said, quietly, "will you get out of my road? Ha! Take that! Pick him up, some one."

And Pedro was lying in the dust, looking up out of a very black eye. He had miscalculated the muscular power of Ned Clayton, and a Mexican has a great respect for muscle. Again he rushed in, and was once more deposited upon mother earth. When he arose this time it was with a knife in his hand. Captain Hardin drew a pistol, but there was no need to use it, for Ned rushed in, wrenched the knife from the Mexican's hand, and snatching up a riding-whip, belabored him until he yelled for mercy.

"There, greaser, take care how you draw a knife on me again, for the next time it won't be a whip I use. Very sorry that this thing has happened, captain."

"Look you, Pedro," said Hardin, "I give you prairie law: three days' run, and if after that we find you in this section, you know what to expect. Now go; don't waste time."

One of his Mexican friends brought out his horse, and Pedro mounted, and the malevolent look upon his face promised revenge if it was ever in his power. The rest rode away down the road, and soon came in sight of Hardin's Ranch. It stood upon the river in the midst of a beautiful country and every thing showed signs of thrifty husbandry. The long, low, rambling buildings with white walls gleaming amid the trees; the rare southern plants, and the groups of black servants, were peculiar characteristics of the Texan ranchero of wealth.

"That is my home," said Lillian. "Is it not beautiful, Ned?"

"It is, indeed," replied the young horse-tamer. "To a homeless outcast, one who has lived a wandering life, and can not even remember his father's face, such a home as that would be a dream of Arcadia."

"It is to be your home," said Lillian, warmly. "Did you not hear me say that you are never to leave us, sir? And do you dare rebel thus early in the day?"

"My daughter is right, my dear Ned," said the captain. "I never had a son, and if I can supply a parent's place to you I shall be happy. And as for my wife—run in and see her, Lilly."

The girl sprang from the saddle and ran into the hall and they heard a glad cry of joy from within.

"I can't see your wife now," said Ned, hurriedly. "She loves her daughter so well that she will be inclined to give me greater credit than I deserve for my share in to-day's business."

"Not a bit of it. My wife is an angel, my boy, far better than a rough old ranger deserves, but I hope my great love for her is something. Boy, you know where to go. Pomp, come here and take this gentleman's horse; and remember, sir, that you are to obey him in every thing as you obey me."

"Ki!" said the Negro, taking the bridle. "I hear ye, marse, but I'se so tickled 'cause you tink we niggas can 'bey any one same as we does you. Ki!"

"Get out, you sooty imp," said the captain, striding into the hall. "Come along, Ned; make yourself at home."

As they came into a long, low sitting-room, a lady who was sitting upon a low chair fondling her daughter's golden hair, arose and came toward them.

"You have saved my daughter's life, sir—I—"

She stopped suddenly and stooping, kissed

him fondly. Ned Clayton started and the tears rushed into his eyes. Remember that he had said that he had passed a lonely boyhood without a mother's love to help him, and that he was a young man of strong affections. He tried to speak, and dashed his hand across his eyes to clear them.

"I can't stand this, madam. If you only knew what a life I have led you would not kiss me; but if you will aid me, by the help of God I will redeem all that."

"Do you think I cannot read your face, dear boy?" she said. "You need companionship—friends, who will aid you in the right, and you shall have them. Thank you for bringing him, James; I have two children now."

She led him to a seat beside her upon a sofa and began to talk with him kindly, and draw from him something of his past life. An outcast boy, he had been picked up in the streets of New Orleans by a man whom he did not name—a person of rare ability, but whom excess and passion had led astray. The man had made him a companion and treated him as a son, but, through it all, the good in the boy's nature had rebelled against him and his life.

"And, madam," said Ned, "if I am not wholly bad, it is not his fault. I think in his wild way he loved me. There was no wish I could express which he would not gratify. And he is a man, too; reckless of his life, brave to desperation and the handsomest man I ever saw."

"How like Duke Elwood, James!" said Mrs. Hardin. "I wonder where he is now?"

"No matter," replied the captain. "It is better that we should never meet, for, of all men, I would not stand opposed to him. I have made Edwin my overseer, Margaret, and he takes charge to-morrow. Pedro has been dismissed."

"Ned dismissed him," said Lilly, with a sly laugh; at which Ned hung his head and looked particularly foolish.

"The wild life will crop out, Mrs. Hardin," he said. "The man behaved very badly, and so—"

"He gave him a dreadful flogging right before me. But I liked it; I always like a fuss, you know, mother dear, and Ned looked so strong and manly when he was flogging that rascal. Oh, it was good!"

"Lilly!"

"Yes, I do like it—I do—I do! And then, when I was hiding in that hole in the rocks, and Ned and Jack—you don't know Jack, yet, but he is a dear good fellow, and must be in the rangers—were fighting the Indians, if I had only had a gun I would have fought too."

"I don't know what to do with this child," said Mrs. Hardin. "You have infected her, James."

"Oh, it is brave to be a man and fight!" cried Lilly, clenching her hand. "I envy the rangers every time I see them go out upon the trail and want to be with them, ever so bad."

"It is not good to encourage this evil disposition in your child, madam," said the snuffling voice of the colporteur at the door. "Verily she taketh delight in blood."

"If you will be so kind as to go back to the dining-room, I will see you directly," said Hardin, pointedly. "At present I am engaged."

The man went back with a strange look upon his face.

"Now mark what I say," said Mrs. Hardin, excitedly. "That is a bad man and I do not believe he is a colporteur at all."

"Ned and myself have agreed that he is not of the right sort," replied the captain. "If he turns out badly let him look out for the rangers, that is all. I will go and talk to him."

CHAPTER VI.

THE DISGUISED OUTLAW.

THE evening was passed pleasantly enough at Hardin's Ranch. The colporteur had retired early, after treating them to a long chapter from the Old Testament, which he read with a drawling, sanctimonious air which was trying. From time to time he looked hard at Ned but the young man seemed to avoid his glance, and studiously looked in another direction. It was quite late when Captain Hardin took a lamp and lighted his new overseer to his room, which was a very pleasant one in the south-west angle of the building; the furniture was arranged with a neatness which bespoke feminine care and taste.

"Now make yourself at home, my boy," said Hardin, as he put the lamp on a table. "I don't care what you have been or what you have done if you only mean to do right now; but, it will be hard to make me believe you have ever done any thing very bad."

"You are too kind to me," said Ned, in a choking voice. "Do you know that I could die for you and yours?"

"There, Ned, say no more about it. I wish you good rest and pleasant dreams."

His step had scarcely ceased to sound along the passage when a door which communicated with the next room was pushed gently open and the colporteur came into the room, and closing the door dropped into a chair and laughed in a strange, silent way, seeming to enjoy himself hugely.

"It is as good as a play, Ned; upon my word it is," he whispered. "I would not have lost the chance for a thousand dollars. How did I do it?"

"You overdid it," replied the young man, in a dogged tone, seating himself upon the edge of the bed. "Now, I want to know what you are doing here?"

"I thought it was plain enough for your comprehension," replied the other, ceasing to laugh at once. "I thought you knew me and was aware that I trust no man too far, or too long. I knew that you went into this work unwillingly and wished to satisfy myself that you could be trusted."

"Are you satisfied?" replied Ned, in the same sullen tone.

"Listen to me, you young hound," hissed the colporteur, coming forward suddenly and grasping the boy by the arm. "Have you nothing to thank me for? have I ever wronged you in any way?"

"I know what you mean," replied the boy. "You took me out of the gutter and made what you call a man of me. But, in what a school have I been taught! To lie in ambush—to steal into the affections of those whom you design to make your victims—to act as your stool-pigeon—it makes me half mad when I think of it!"

"You are bound to me by an oath which you dare not break, Ned Clayton! Enough of talk; I sent you here with an object in view. Have you done what I told you?"

"I am already upon a familiar footing in this family, but, as I live, I will not betray them."

"You don't know what you're saying, Ned," said the colporteur, quietly. "If you persist in that it is my duty to see that you are placed beyond the possibility of doing us a wrong. I think you would do well to reflect calmly upon what you have said."

"I have made up my mind fully," replied young Clayton. "You talk of dooming me to death, do you? How would it answer if I gave you up to Captain Hardin and his rangers, telling him who and what you are?"

The man shivered slightly, and a look of fear crossed his face for a moment but passed away immediately.

"Bah! what a fool I am getting to be in my old age," said the colporteur, laughing. "I know you too well to think that you would take an unfair advantage of any man, much less of one who has been your friend. Now listen to me. Suppose yourself in the place of a man who is young, rich and honored. Suppose that this man has a friend who owes much to him and in whom he puts implicit faith, and that friend betrays him in the most dastardly manner and upon a point of the most tender kind. What would that false friend deserve?"

"Death—but in a fair fight, man to man," replied Ned.

"But, suppose that he, sneaking behind the plea that he is not a duelist, refuses the satisfaction due a gentleman, and having put it out of the power of his former friend ever to hold up his head again, marries the woman that man has chosen, and laughs at the poor wretch when he writhes in agony. What is such a man as that?"

"A villain, if the tale is true."

"Years pass and each has lost track of the other, when the disgraced man comes to Texas. He is an outlaw—the hand of every man is against him, and he hopes in this new land to find a home. He has long ago ceased to be honest; his is the old law:

"They shall take who have the power,
And they shall keep who can."

He breaks the unwritten law of Texas, and a band of men are organized to hunt him down. Who is at their head? This same false friend who has so wronged him. He is rich; the woman who was to have married his friend loves him, and the friendless outcast sees her still young and beautiful—all the devils in hell! I shall go mad."

"Be careful; you are talking too loud and they will hear you."

"I am the man so hounded and persecuted,"

kissed the colporteur, "and the man who wronged me is—Captain Hardin."

"I do not believe it," said Ned, fiercely. "No man dare look in James Hardin's face and call him a villain."

"But I tell you that it is true," replied the other, in a hoarse voice. "It is true as gospel, and I have sworn never to rest until his head is brought as low as mine; and if one of those whom I have chosen to aid me dares to rebel, if he were of my own blood, I would kill him. Now you understand why I hate James Hardin, and why I will follow him to the death."

"What do you intend to do?"

"To make his life a burden to him, as mine has been to me. Heap sorrow upon sorrow, misery upon misery, until he will pray for death. To rob him of all he holds dear upon earth, little by little, and you shall aid me."

"Never!" replied Ned, boldly. "Until this hour I never knew your heart, and I fling to the winds your vile oaths. I am no longer one of your men, and I defy you to do your worst."

The colporteur thrust his hand into his bosom, and the bright barrel of a pistol showed for a moment; but Ned was as prompt as he, and a weapon gleamed in his hand.

"This is child's play, captain," said he. "You will have to mark out a fresh trail, now that you have me to deal with."

"I have loved and trusted you," was the reply, "and you turn against me for the sake of a man I hate. Ned Clayton, you will live to repent this hour, bitterly, bitterly. There, let there be a truce between us. Put up your weapon, for I promise not to harm you tonight."

Ned replaced his pistol, for it was evident that the man meant just what he said.

"I trust you," he said; "but be so good as to bear in mind that I am as quick on the trigger as you are, and quite as ready to call in the aid of powder and ball. Now then, explain yourself."

"The explanation must come from you," replied the colporteur. "You were sent here upon an errand in the interest of the band. I ask you now if you intend to do your duty?"

"Not if my duty points to the destruction of this good family," replied Ned, boldly.

"You know the penalty of disobedience."

"You must catch a fox before you skin him," was the laughing reply. "Let me tell you that I have friends more powerful than you ever were, and can trust them. As for you—all your teachings, from first to last, have been evil; I have struggled against them, but for years they have held me. I throw off forever the unholy bargain, and will lead a new life."

"Turn preacher, eh?" sneered the colporteur. "You will make a capital one, upon my word. Do you know that if you persist in this, your doom is sealed?"

"I will take my chances of life or death. All I ask of you is to let me alone in the life which I have marked out for myself, and I give you my word that I will never trouble you. Will you do this?"

"I make no terms with you, young traitor," replied the other, fiercely. "There—I have said all I need to say upon the subject; but be sure of this—you have not a week to live."

"You must leave this house in the morning, and never let me see you here again," cried Ned. "Do you understand that?"

"I shall leave it when I see fit," was the reply. "I do not believe that you are coward enough to betray me to my enemies after I have put faith in you."

"As long as you keep quiet, do not attempt to communicate with your men, or in any way betray this family, you are welcome to stay; but you must remain under my eye all the time."

Then an laughed—a low, fierce laugh, which had a world of meaning in it, and swinging open the door of his own chamber, stepped in and closed the door behind him. There was a bolt upon the door, and this Ned shot into the socket before he lay down to rest.

He remained awake until he was satisfied that the colporteur had retired, and then dropped asleep. The man in the next room remained quiet for about an hour, and then arose and listened at the door.

The deep breathing of the young man convinced him that the boy was asleep, and putting off his shoes, he stole cautiously to the door which opened into the hall, and looked out.

"I would cut that young traitor's throat from ear to ear if I could get at him," he muttered. "Ten thousand fiends! To think that he should turn against me, of all men! I wonder if he has roped in Jack! Two of my best men gone,

if he has, and at a moment when I need them worst. Now for business."

His eyes had not been idle during the day, and he knew the sleeping-apartment of every person in the house. Just as he crossed the hall, he saw a glimmering light at the other end, approaching the place where he stood, and had just time to see that it was Lillian, alone, and carrying a lighted lamp in her hand, before he hurried into a room on the right, which he knew was occupied by the girl.

He had just time to conceal himself behind a closet-door, when she came in, humming a merry song, and placing the lamp upon a table, began to take down and comb her beautiful hair, before retiring. There was something in the innocent grace of this sweet child which held him spell-bound, and he hesitated long before he dared carry out his design; but all chance of retreat was cut off when she approached the closet for some article which it contained. This was his opportunity.

He seized her so suddenly, that before she had time to utter a cry she lay helpless in his strong grasp, with a pistol pointed at her head.

"Beware!" he hissed; "the least outcry will be your death, and the death of any who comes to your aid."

Lilly would not have heeded the first part of the threat, but she feared for the safety of those she loved, and while she hesitated, a gag was thrust into her mouth which put it out of her power to cry out if she had been so inclined. Her hands were tightly bound behind her, and the villain arose with a triumphant look upon his face.

"So far, good," he muttered. "This is but the beginning of my vengeance. I will wring their hearts as they have tortured mine."

He stopped and listened. The house was now still as death, and he looked quickly about the chamber. It was upon the ground floor, opening toward the prairie, and was lighted by two large windows, one of which was open. He stepped to the window and looked out across the prairie, his lips moving in a strange, hurried way, as if in invocation. His hands opened and closed convulsively, and the foam showed itself upon his thin lips.

"This girl is her mother in miniature," he muttered. "They love her beyond any thing on earth. I know that from what they said to Ned Clayton when he brought her home, and I could not aim a blow more directly at their hearts."

He pushed the window a little higher up, and, as it rattled slightly, he stooped quickly and shrunk out of sight in the shadow of the wall, and waited to see if the noise had awakened any one. Not a sound was heard, and he lifted Lilly in his arms and stepped out of the window. He had hardly done so, when two men appeared from behind the horse corral, one of them leading a spare horse.

"I've got the girl, my lads," he whispered. "Here, take her, Bennett."

The man addressed, who was one of those who had been playing cards with Pedro that morning, raised the girl in his arms. As he did so, the gag fell from her mouth, and she uttered shriek after shriek, which rung out in the silent night.

"The cursed cat!" screamed the colporteur, snatching the bridle of the led horse and springing into the saddle. "Ride for your lives, men, ride! Stop her squawking, Bennett, your hand is broad enough."

Even as he spoke they darted away, the hand of the outlaw pressed hard upon the mouth and nostrils of their fair prisoner. Lights flashed in various parts of the house, and in an incredibly short space of time they heard the rapid beat of hoofs in close pursuit.

"By all the devils, they are after us!" shrieked the colporteur. "Whip and spur! Whip and spur! Use your bowies if the spurs are not enough."

They rode hard, but they could make out that the pursuers were gaining rapidly, for they were admirably mounted. The colporteur bent his head a moment and listened intently.

"Only two of them, and one is leaving the other behind," he said. "My dear friend, whoever you are, be careful that you do not ride too fast, for it may bring you to trouble. Bennett, if we have to fight, ride with the girl, and remember that I would rather they found her dead than alive. If we are not kept her, you know what to do."

They dashed on together for some distance, and one of the pursuing horsemen came rapidly upon them.

"Ride on, Joe!" said the colporteur. "You know where to take her. Follow me."

He wheeled and rode back, and soon found himself face to face with Ned Clayton, riding the black mustang which he had tamed. Without exchanging a word, both leveled their weapons and fired.

CHAPTER VII.

A STRUGGLE FOR LIFE.

BOTH were adepts in the use of the pistol, and only an accident saved the life of the colporteur. His horse stumbled and fell upon his knees, as he pulled the trigger, and his bullet flew wide of the mark, while that of Ned Clayton passed over the spot where his head was a moment before. Unfortunately for Davidson, he was in the line of the bullet and was shot through the throat, and fell to the earth with an inarticulate cry of pain. The quick hand of the colporteur brought his horse to his feet, but not in time to avoid the rush of Ned Clayton. There was but one way, and dropping his rein, he caught the young man by the shoulders, and, as the horses rushed on, both men fell from the saddle, locked in a close grapple.

"Devil!" hissed the colporteur, "we will try our strength."

"I am you man!" replied Ned. "Coward, must you strike at a weak girl? I will teach you a lesson."

Neither spoke after that, and a desperate struggle began. Twice had Ned Clayton freed one hand long enough to dash it into the face of his antagonist, which was quickly bathed in blood, but he was a determined villain, and these blows only seemed to arouse the innate ferocity of his nature. Again Ned freed his hand, but, instead of striking, grasped his enemy by the throat and closed his strong hand with a fierce energy, a gripe which could not be shaken off. The scoundrel would have drawn a knife, but his strength was fast leaving him and he could only make feeble clutches at the iron hand upon his throat. Every thing grew dark about him, a mist swam before his eyes, when he heard the beat of hoofs, and Captain Hardin rode up.

"Don't kill him, don't kill him, Ned," he cried, eagerly. "We may need him yet."

"Jump down and tie him, then," replied Ned. "This is no baby I am holding, but a deadly enemy."

Captain Hardin had tied up many prisoners in his day, and his work was quickly and artistically done.

"That will do, captain. Now help me to lay him in the shadow of the bushes, and we will follow the other, who has carried Lilly away."

While speaking he had knotted a handkerchief about the blade of a bowie, forming a gag of the handle which he thrust into the mouth of the colporteur and tied at the back of his head. This done, he sprang up and assisted the captain in laying their prisoner under the bushes.

"If a jaguar should happen along, it would be a good thing for the world," he said. "Mount and away, captain. I am afraid this fight has given the other too much start."

"I thought there were three?" said the captain.

Ned pointed to the form of Davidson stretched upon the prairie, but said not a word, and turning their horses' heads in the direction taken by Bennett, they rode on for some miles at the top of their speed, and never slackened until they reached the edge of a gloomy chaparral, many miles in extent.

"I feared this, captain," said Ned, drawing bridle. "The wretch has taken to the chaparral and to follow him into it now would be worse than madness. Besides, he has friends not far away, and we must ride hard to escape them."

"But my daughter, Ned; my darling Lilly. Must I leave her in the power of these villains?"

"They won't dare to harm her, for the simple reason that we have their captain in our hands. We had better ride back and secure him."

"Do you mean the colporteur?"

"No more a colporteur than I am, although he played the part well. He is no more nor less than the celebrated Tom Duke, the worst horse-thief on the Texan plains. I told you before that my companions were bad ones, captain; I did not dare to tell you how bad."

"Do you know their haunt in the chaparral?"

"I am sorry to say that I do not, captain. I have had little to do with their marauding expeditions, although I have always joined in their Indian fights. The captain has kept their business from me as much as possible; and it was only the other day, in a fit of desperation,

that I joined them in earnest. If you fear to trust me I will leave you."

"I have told you before that I am willing to trust you, my dear boy; I believe that you will be true as steel, but I fear that you put your life in danger."

"As to that I do not care a pin. I am ready to meet the danger at any time if you trust me. Will you take my advice then?"

"Let me hear what you have to say," replied the captain.

"Let us ride back and take up the prisoner and carry him to your house. Then call in the rangers and give him in charge and let me go to Duke's camp and offer him in exchange for Lilly."

"You would not dare to do that."

"Try me and see how much I dare do for your sake and Lilly's. They won't dare to harm me while you hold the captain."

"I think you are right; lead the way." They turned and rode back at the same pace at which they had come, and had nearly reached the place where they had left their prisoner, when they saw a number of shadowy figures grouped upon the prairie near the scene of the late struggle. They were gathered about the body of Davidson and seemed to be in doubt as to who had killed him. Ned caught Hardin's horse by the bridle and forced him back.

"Indians!" he hissed; "turn back, and get out of range."

They fell back in silence, and placed a clump of timber between themselves and the enemy, and from this point watched their motions. As they gazed they heard the charging cheer of the rangers and saw that the savage band were leaping confusedly into the saddle to meet a sudden onslaught.

"Hurrah!" cried Ned. "It is Single Hand and his men, and the rangers are at them. Come on!"

Captain Hardin was as eager for the fray as Ned, and, urging their horses, they plunged at once into the thickest of the fight. The contest was not of long duration, for the Indians scattered over the plain with the rangers in hot pursuit. Ned Clayton singled out the gigantic chief and attacked him with knife and hatchet, but the wily chief saw that his men were scattering, and, drawing suddenly back, he thrust his long spear through the neck of Ned's horse, bringing him to the ground, and then, wheeling quickly, darted away across the plain. Hardin with his bugle recalled the rangers from the pursuit, and they came back sullenly and picked up the scalps of the fallen.

"We've got business on hand, boys," said Ned, coming up on foot. "I say, Jack, lasso one of those horses for me; be sure and pick out a good one, for that rascally Indian has speared mine through the neck. Let us see after our prisoner, captain."

The two hurried to the bushes and found Tom Duke just as they had left him.

"We had better not let the men know who we have got, captain, or they won't be willing to let him go. Most of them have a spite against him. I'll relieve you of this gag now."

As the handle of the bowie was removed, the prisoner drew a long breath and looked steadily at Ned Clayton. He did not speak, but the expression of his face was something dreadful, and those who saw it shuddered.

"Look here, Ned," said Captain Hardin, "I think that to insure your safety the sooner we tuck this fellow up the better. His hatred of you is something beyond any thing of which I ever heard."

"Don't fear for me, captain," replied Ned. "There is no love lost between this man and myself, and but for your coming he would have been under the sod by this time. I was mad then, and should not have loosed my hold."

"I'll remember you in the time to come," Master Ned Clayton. Captain Hardin are you aware that this young scoundrel is one of my hand, sworn to keep our secrets?" said Duke.

"So he has told me," replied the captain, quietly. "For your own good I warn you not to let the men know who you really are, or I am afraid that I should find it quite impossible to restrain them. What is it, Jack?"

The companion of Ned Clayton had come up, and was looking at the captive with wildly-dilated eyes.

"The devil! Who have you got here?" he gasped.

"Keep your tongue between your teeth, Jack," whispered Ned. "We don't want the men to know him yet."

"I should think not. They'd tear him into a hundred pieces as sure as my name is Jack."

The old man wants to know which way to ride."

"Home, tell him. Get a spare horse for the prisoner, and be quick about it."

Five minutes later the party were in motion, riding toward Hardin's ranch. The prisoner rode between the captain and Ned Clayton, with two lariats about his neck, the end of one fastened to Ned's saddle-bow, and the other to that of the captain. A sullen silence had fallen upon the prisoner, and he rode with bent head, writhing in his bonds as they galled him.

"That camp of which you spoke will be an unsafe place to visit, with the Indians on the trail," said Hardin. "Are you not afraid you may fall in with Single Hand?"

"I think we have given him a lesson," replied Ned, "and he will not stay long in this section. I have heard that he was in league with a band of white horse-thieves; but I am not sure."

"Tell all you know, Ned, my boy," said the prisoner, without looking up. "Why not say that he is in league with me?"

"I would not swear that he is not," replied Ned; "but I am not certain. I think you had better keep a civil tongue in your head, or the men may hear you."

"I'm not afraid, my boy. If I understand it, I am to be exchanged for this girl."

"That is the idea; are you willing?"

"Not exactly willing, Ned; but sometimes circumstances over which we have no control compel us to do things which do not suit us. Yes, I will give the girl in exchange for my liberty upon one condition."

"And what is that?"

"That I am not betrayed to the rangers. To do this, it will be necessary for me to keep my disguise—of course the captain knows by this time that it is a disguise—until the exchange is made?"

"Are you willing to agree to that, Captain Hardin?" asked Ned.

"Certainly; it is not much to ask, after all. You must, however, give Ned credentials in order that he may show himself safely in your camp, as well as to tell him what course to pursue."

"I am willing," replied the prisoner; "but oh, how I will make you suffer for all this, Ned Clayton."

"Bah! Don't threaten like a six-year-old boy. Here we are at the ranch, captain. Go in and tell your wife what has happened, and tell her, too, that I will not come back unless I bring Lilly with me."

"Look out for the prisoner," whispered the captain. "You know how much depends on him."

Ned showed his pistol in a quiet way, which convinced both the captain and his prisoner that he would use it if needful, without remorse. The captain sprang out of the saddle and ran into the house, while Ned helped his prisoner from the saddle and led him into the hall.

"That carrot-headed son of a gun needs a little lariat," muttered Prairie Joe. "I don't like his looks, not a darned bit."

"He does look pizen, old man," said Jack Evans, who had become quite popular with the rangers. "I reckon he's a night-bird; I'm sure he looks like it."

"Don't try to escape, Tom," said Clayton, as they stood in the hall. "It will be painful for me to shoot you, but I shall certainly do so if you try to run—so look out for yourself."

"I'm not going to try it my lad," replied Tom, with a side-glance. "You are heaping up trouble for the time to come, I warn you."

"All right; I'll take the chances. Here comes the captain again, and now we'll go ahead and see what kind of a prison he has got for you."

"Why not let me go? I promise to send the girl safe home."

"We can't trust you, captain. Men of your sort, when desperate, often forget their promised word of honor. No; I will go myself, and bring the girl back."

"Then I must trust you, it seems, although you refuse to trust me."

"That seems to be the programme, captain. Here is a table with pen, ink and paper. Sit down and write a note to Joel Bennett, telling him to give up the girl."

He sat down and wrote a note, with sparkling eyes.

"Perhaps you would like to read it?" he said.

"No," replied Ned, quietly. "Of course it will be better for you to make it strong, for the rangers will kill you if I am not back here in three days."

The outlaw looked troubled, tore up the note which he had written, and wrote another—this time one which seemed to suit him better. Ned thrust the letter into his pocket, and helped the captain put handcuffs on the prisoner.

"You dare to degrade me with irons, like a felon?" he hissed. "Wait until my turn for revenge comes."

They took him between them and led him down to a strong cellar, into which he was thrust, and his feet manacled.

"Now understand me, captain," said Ned. "I am going to the camp of the outlaws, and when once there, I shall try to get Lilly. Whether I fail or not, I shall come back as far as Deep Canon within three days. If that is not done, you will know that there has been foul-play. Jack will wait for me in the canon for three days, and if I do not come back, you know what to do."

The heavy door clanged upon the prisoner, and he was alone; but shortly after he heard a man pacing up and down before the stout door and knew that he had a sentinel. Dragging his heavy irons to the small window, not wide enough to permit the passage of a man's body, he looked out and saw Ned Clayton and Jack in the act of mounting their horses. They were detained at the last moment by Mrs. Hardin, who came out to bid Ned God-speed and kiss him. The expression of the man's face became demoniac.

"The older she grows the more beautiful she is," he muttered. "If it were not for Coral, I don't know what I might do. Poor girl! she at least has been faithful. I want that young hound's blood, and I will have it."

While he thus muttered, the two adventurers touched their horses and rode away at a rapid pace, heading for the scene of the late conflict.

"It is the game of life," he murmured. "Who wins?"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FAIR CAPTIVE.

WE left Lillian Hardin a prisoner in the hands of Joel Bennett, the trusty aid-de-camp of Tom Duke. The man had been well selected. A glance at his face would have convinced any one that he would do his master's bidding, and destroy the innocent girl if hard pressed by his pursuers. It was well for her that he gained the depths of the chaparral before they could overtake him, for twice, when hard pushed, he had put his hand upon his knife to accomplish his fell purpose.

But, no sooner was he in the chaparral than he dismounted, with a malicious grin upon his face, and waited for the coming of his companions. What was his rage when he knew by the voices upon the edge of the thicket that Tom Duke had not succeeded in his attempt to stop Captain Hardin and Ned Clayton.

"I'll bet a thousand dollars they've gone under," he muttered. "Ef they have, little 'un, you'll wish you had never been born. See here—I'm going to take my hand away from your mouth, and if you yell, I'll kill you on the spot. Understand now, for I mean it."

"I shall not scream," said Lilly, as he removed his broad hand. "It would be useless now that we are in the woods, but, don't think that I am afraid of you, coward that you are."

The man laughed at the spirit shown by the young girl.

"You're the boss-gal, miss," he said. "Blame me if you don't beat my time all to nothing. I s'pose you'd stick a knife into me if you only got the chance."

"Try me," replied Lilly, boldly, "and you can convince yourself upon that point. I would take your life as I would that of a viper."

"Good!" said Bennett. "I knew you was the spunkiest gal in Texas. Come, we've got to get deeper into the chaparral; I'm afraid Captain Duke has gone under."

"A good thing for the world if he has. A despicable villain who steals into an honest house under the cloak of religion, and betrays those who trusted him."

"It won't be very good for you if he is dead, my girl," replied Bennett, "for your fate will be a hard one, I'm thinking. Come along, and, as you go, pray that Captain Duke may be alive."

He took a lariat and bound the arms of his prisoner behind her; then, with the other end of the rawhide rope in his hand he ordered her in front, while he led the horses, directing her which path to take. In this way they kept on for over an hour, through tangled paths, until the chaparral became more open, when they again mounted and rode on at a rapid pace.

Lilly was sitting behind the horseman, and,

as he still held the end of the rope he was not very attentive to her proceedings, when she suddenly slipped from the horse and ran into the thicket. She had managed to slip the rope from her arms and thus get clear of her captor. Uttering a sounding oath, the ruffian sprung after her, but found to his dismay that he was being distanced by the quick-footed girl, whom a life upon the border had given a wonderful physical development, seldom seen in one so young. The paths were many and diverging to every point of the compass, and as she got out of his sight for a moment it was impossible for him to say which one she had taken. There was but one way; so, raising his fingers to his lips, he uttered a shrill call, which was answered at once from the woods beyond, and twenty or thirty rough-looking men quickly joined him.

"Scatter, and search the woods," he cried. "A girl—a prisoner—has escaped from me! Be quick, for she runs like a deer."

The men at once darted down the different paths, satisfied that they could run her down before she reached the open prairie. Lilly heard the signal and knowing that she could not escape by running, and remembering the manner in which she had eluded the Indians upon a former occasion, crept under the low branches of a ground pine, came out upon the other side of the tree, and plunged into the thicker part of the chaparral. She had hardly done so when those of her pursuers who had taken the path she had chosen ran rapidly by. When they had passed she arose and looked about her for a tree in which to find shelter, for she dared not move, knowing that, at any moment, she might come upon her enemies.

Near at hand was a low oak, whose thick branches seemed fitted to give her shelter, and, grasping one of the lower limbs, she drew herself up until she was perched upon a stout limb. After taking breath for a moment she climbed higher and found that the thick leaves would completely hide her from observation.

There she sat, listening anxiously to the sounds which came from the forest, hoping that they would not find her, and yet hardly knowing what to do in case she escaped, for she was alone in the depths of the chaparral, which was of vast extent, and she did not know which way to turn to reach the prairie.

As she sat there, she heard a slight rustling in the leaves, and looking up encountered the gaze of a pair of fiery eyes, fixed upon her in a threatening manner. At the same moment a brown arm, armed with a long knife, was thrust out from among the leaves and she saw the head and shoulders of a painted Comanche just above her, threatening her with instant destruction if she cried out. She recovered herself in an instant, and making a signal to the Indian to remain quiet and she would do the same, settled herself firmly upon the branch and waited.

The Comanche was evidently at a loss, and his wild eyes roved over her figure in blank bewilderment. She saw that he was in a quandary and made him a lofty gesture, implying her absolute power over him, which added to the mystery of her presence. The white men were now scattered through the woods in all directions, and some of them were breaking through the bushes not far away, and two or three presently stopped directly under the tree in which the Indian and Lilly were concealed.

"Bennett was foolish to trust a girl like that," said one.

"I for one don't believe we'll catch her, and don't care much, either," said another.

"Let them search if they will," growled a strangely-familiar voice. "It is none of our business to search for Bennett's escaped prisoners. We will sit down under the tree and let her run. Did he tell you who it was, comrade?"

"Hardin's daughter."

"Carambo! The most beautiful little creature this side of the Rio Grande. I hate her father above all men on earth, but she is a divine creature."

"Don't be a fool, Pedro; this is the captain's game, and no one dares interfere with it."

"Am I a fool, then? I tell you that the little girl has often looked upon me with favorable eyes. Indeed, I think she loves me, and was deeply grieved when her father discarded me for that accursed young dog, who shall feel the length of my knife, some day."

"I heard that Ned Clayton trounced you finely that day. Why, you donkey, boy that he is, he can lick any five greasers in Texas. I've a good mind to say ten."

"It is false, Blanchard, it is false!" screamed the Mexican, for it was no other than Pedro

whom Ned Clayton had supplanted. "He had me at a disadvantage—"

"Pshaw! He can lick you in half a minute by the watch, and I'd undertake to do it myself in twice the time."

Pedro sprung to his feet, furious with passion, and laid his hand upon a knife, for which he was promptly knocked down by the man he had called Blanchard, for Americans in those days paid little heed to the "greasers," whom they held in contempt as men below them in the scale of nature. How far the quarrel might have gone it is impossible to say, but at this moment, the Indian who was leaning forward to see the fight broke the limb upon which he was seated and fell to the earth.

This at once changed the current of events, and the two white men, including the Mexican, who arose and joined them, at once assailed the Comanche, who, placing his back to the tree, defended himself manfully against the combined attack. He was a lithe, active young fellow, whose intelligent face and warlike bearing showed that he held no mean place in the tribe, and he certainly handled his weapons with consummate skill. Assailed by three men at once, he managed to keep their knives off his body, and wounded Blanchard in the shoulder, though not deeply.

It is hard to say how the struggle might have ended if Pedro had not seized a heavy branch and struck the Indian while he was parrying a blow from Blanchard's knife, causing his arm to drop nerveless at his side.

In an instant the red-skin was seized and thrown to the earth, and a knife raised above his unprotected breast. Lilly had seen the struggle of one against three, but when she saw the brave savage fall she could not bear it; and dropping from her perch, she caught the uplifted hand of Blanchard in hers.

"No, no," she cried. "He is a brave man—do not strike him when he has been overcome by numbers."

"It's the captain's daughter!" cried Blanchard. "Catch hold of her, Pedro, do not let her run again."

"You need not hold me, sir," replied Lilly. "I shall not attempt to escape, but if you are a man, and you look like one out of place among these ruffians, you will not slay a helpless prisoner."

"That's so!" said Blanchard, looking a little ashamed of himself. "You see, my fighting blood was up, miss, and I didn't know what I was doing. Get up, Red, but don't try to run or you'll get hurt."

The Indian understood the gestures, although not the words, and stood up, holding out his hands for the ropes.

"We'll keep him until the Cap comes back," said Blanchard, who was a good-looking, reckless young fellow in hunter's dress. "You mustn't think hard of us if we take you back, miss; it's our duty."

"I shall not quarrel with you for that, sir," she replied, "but, I hope you will treat me well."

"Let me hear a man insult you, or see him as much as look at you against your will, and I'll be into him with a bloody spur. Get out of the way, Pedro; what are you about?"

Pedro had seized Lilly by the wrist and was holding her fast, but fell back muttering as Blanchard advanced.

"You two take care of the Indian and see that he does not escape. Whistle, and let the others know it is all right, Ben."

The other man, who had not yet spoken a word, obeyed orders. Blanchard signed to Lilly to come with him, and breaking a way for her through the tangled bushes, reached one of the paths, down which he proceeded at a rapid pace. They were soon joined by others, and at last Bennett came up, overjoyed at the recapture of Lilly.

"I'll tell you what it is, my girl," he said, threatening her with his clenched hand, "if you try that thing again it will be the worst thing you ever did."

"Come, don't bully a girl, Bennett," said the young man called Blanchard. "That won't do you know."

"What have you got to say about it, Jim Blanchard?"

"It's enough for you to know that I won't see her abused, Bennett. You know me of old, so don't try to come the old soldier over me. If you do, you'll wake up the wrong boy, sure!"

The bold bearing of the young man had its effect, and after growling out some fierce rejoinder, Bennett drew back and looked at the Indian.

"What did you want to make a prisoner for?"

he demanded. "You know well enough that we have no time to waste upon them."

"You attend to your own affairs and I'll try to do the same, Bennett," was the cool reply. "Ben and I took that prisoner and we'll answer to the captain for it. My opinion is that if you hurt that Indian you'll make a big mistake."

Bennett said no more, and shortly after they reached a camp in the midst of the chaparral, where several women, most of them Mexicans of the lower class, came out to meet them, and examined the prisoners with great curiosity.

"Get out of the way, girls," said Blanchard, laughing. "Anita, come here!"

The prettiest and youngest of the women came forward at his command.

"I'm going to give you in charge of my wife," said Blanchard, "and you must promise not to attempt to escape until we hear from our captain, or I shall be obliged to set a guard over you, Miss Hardin. Do you agree to that?"

Lillian readily promised and went away with the Mexican woman, who seemed to take great pride in her charge.

"Your husband has been very kind, although I am his prisoner," said Lillian, as they entered one of the several huts in the opening. "I am surprised to see him here."

Anita shrugged her shoulders. "Bah! what would you have, senora? My husband will keep faith with his companions, although it is not my will that he is here. You must be very tired, and I will show you a place of rest."

There was a little alcove, formed from blankets, in one corner of the room, and within this a rude bed. Lillian was worn out, and, without disrobing, she lay down upon the blankets and was quickly asleep. When she awoke it was morning, and Anita was preparing a savory breakfast, while Blanchard sat in the doorway smoking his pipe.

"I don't take very kindly to kidnapping, Miss Hardin," he said, removing his pipe from his mouth, "and the captain has got to explain this when he comes back. Do you know that your Indian friend gave us the slip last night?"

"I am glad to hear it, sir."

"Oh, are you? I don't know as I care much about it, for I think he is a son of Single Hand, and the old chief would remember it if we wronged him. What's all that noise about?"

He stepped to the door and looked out, and saw that a man who had just ridden into the camp was surrounded by the outlaws, who were making furious gestures. He ran out and broke into the circle, and saw that the visitor was Ned Clayton, who was sitting quietly in the saddle, looking coolly over the excited group, but with a hand upon a pistol.

"Back, all of you," cried Blanchard. "Let us hear what he has to say."

CHAPTER IX.

AN APPARITION.

"He's a traitor," hissed Bennett, forcing a way for himself among the men, "and he's got to die the death of a traitor. You all know what one such man can do against us in Texas, boys. He's only got to tell Captain Hardin where we corral the stock we 'raise,' and where we hide ourselves, and we are done for. What I say is this: if any man is false to his oath, let him bear the penalty. Have you anything to say against that, Jim Blanchard?"

"Of course not," replied Blanchard. "I know that Ned Clayton never was willing to take much part in the work, except breaking horses and fighting Indians, but I don't think he is a traitor. Come, Ned, speak up; tell them that they are liars, and I'll back you—I'll back you until all is blue."

"I have left the band," replied Ned Clayton, boldly, while a perfect howl of rage arose on every side. "I have left it because I could not do the evil deeds which were required of me by Tom Duke."

Blanchard hung his head, for he knew that the young man had spoken his death-warrant, and he saw the triumphant look upon the face of Bennett.

"Drag him off the horse, boys," cried the desperado. "Get a lariat, some one: you hear him confess, don't you?"

"You intend to hang me, do you?" said Ned, quietly. "I would not do that, if I were you."

"Don't let him talk," screamed Bennett, furious at the coolness of the youngster. "String him up at once."

"It won't be safe to do that, I tell you," replied Ned. "Keep your gang off me, Joe Bennett, or some one in this good crowd will get hurt. Blanchard, do me the favor to keep them away, for, as sure as you put a finger on me or delay my return to the place I came from, Cap-

tain Hardin will hang your worthy leader, Tom Duke."

"Curse him, he lies!" cried Bennett. "The captain is all right, and will be here in an hour."

"Do you really think so?" said Ned, laughing.

"You are the most sanguine fellow in Texas, then, for even Duke don't think so. However, I am willing to wait an hour, if that will do you any good. In the mean time there is a little document which you will read to the men, Blanchard."

He produced a paper, which he placed in Blanchard's hand, who commanded silence, and read aloud:

"AT HARDIN'S RANCH, July 12th, 18—.

"TO MY MEN IN THE CHAPARRAL:

"I am a prisoner in the hands of Captain Hardin, and likely to be hung if you do not comply with the demands of the man they send. Deliver to him the prisoner Miss Hardin, and let them go away unhurt. It is the only way in which I can obtain my liberty. In my absence, Blanchard, under the orders of Coral, will be in command of the band. TOM DUKE."

"It's a forgery!" cried Bennett, looking about on the group of crestfallen faces. "It's a trick to get the prisoner away from us."

"Nonsense," replied Blanchard. "I recognize this writing, and it is the captain's hand, so don't be fools. I understand by this that you want the girl, Ned?"

"Precisely; nothing can be more plain," replied the young man.

"Will you take her away at once?"

"I am obliged to do so, in order to get back in time. You see, that if I am gone more than three days, the swinging-branch will be the portion of your worthy leader."

"I cave. You've got us dead, and it isn't the least use to kick against it. I would like to have you see Coral, if it can be done."

"Coral is here," replied a rich, full voice. "What do you want with me? What is this I hear?"

"Duke is a prisoner, madam," said Blanchard, extending the letter. "Here is what he says about it."

She snatched the letter from his hand and devoured it, word by word, her black eyes flashing strangely as she read. A more beautiful woman than the one called Coral is rarely seen in this imperfect world. Of medium height—with a clear, creamy complexion, such as is only seen in the creole—with golden-brown hair floating in profusion about her lovely form, and eyes large, dark-blue, and full of melting tenderness; with a queenly grace of motion, given only to a gifted few, and delicate feet and hands, she was a model of womanly beauty and grace.

Her dress was Mexican, and jewels of rare price sparkled at her throat and on her bosom. A golden belt was girdled about her waist, in which hung a pair of silver-mounted pistols and a jeweled dagger.

"So, Ned Clayton," she said, turning upon him quickly. "You are a traitor, it seems. What have you got to say for yourself?"

"I prefer to say it to you alone, Coral," he replied.

"Fall back, men; leave us together," she said, in a commanding voice. The men seemed accustomed to obedience to her orders, for they were hardly given when Ned Clayton and this beautiful woman stood alone upon the level sand.

"I can not tell you how much it grieves me that you should be false to us, Ned," she said, softly. "If I had been asked to point out one among all whom I have known who would not be faithless to their oath, you are the one, Ned. Why did you do it? why did you turn against us?"

"Coral," replied Ned, hanging his head, "will you never understand that it is not in my nature to love this savage life of ours? I would not have done you any harm—I told Duke so when we met—but I wanted to live an honest life."

"Pshaw! I thought you above such pitiful foolishness as that. Do you know that you deserve to die, and that Duke will kill you when he escapes?"

"I don't think it will pay to threaten me now, Coral. I have got a little the best of the bargain, and have no time to waste in idle words. As for you, there will never be a time when I will not be ready to lay down my life in your defense. You are beautiful, and have a brave heart, and no lad ever had a better friend than you have been to me; but, I can not stay here."

"You have chosen your path, Ned. I am sorry to lose you, and warn you to get out of Texas as soon as you can. We may meet again, in a happier hour than this, when you will not be ashamed to own Coral as a friend. I wish to

ask you a question. This Captain Hardin—I know that Duke hates him—but who is he?"

"A brave and good man, against whom Tom Duke feels the most deadly hate. Shall I tell you why?"

"If you will."

"Because they loved the same woman years ago, and Hardin won her. This is her daughter whom you have prisoner here, and for whom we are willing to exchange the captain. They tell me that what she is now her mother was at her age."

"I must see her," cried Coral, eagerly. "Where is she?"

"Blanchard can tell you that. Here, Jim; Coral wants to see Miss Hardin."

"She is in my cabin with my wife," replied Blanchard. "You can see her there if you like."

Ned and Coral accompanied him to the door of the cabin, and, as they entered, Lilly, who was sitting in a dejected attitude upon a low stool, sprung to her feet, and with a cry of joy threw herself into Ned Clayton's arms.

"Oh, Ned—dear Ned, have you come to take me back to my father?"

"Yes, Lilly, yes; did you think we would leave you here?"

Coral did not speak, but, advancing, she looked at Lillian so intently that the girl winced under her steady gaze, and drew back in some alarm.

"Do not fear me, sweet one," said Coral, tenderly. "Yes, you are beautiful and you are good. If your mother had that face when she was young it is no wonder that he loved her. How dare he bring you here?"

"Hush!" replied Ned. "It is a part of his revenge."

"It was unmanly in him, the only unmanly act of which I ever knew him guilty," said the beautiful woman. "You must take her away at once, Ned, and guard her better after this. My darling girl, would you mind kissing one who, though erring and sinful, has yet a woman's heart and can love that which is good and beautiful?"

Lilly sprang into her arms and kissed her again and again.

"There, sweet one, we must part. Perhaps it is our fate never to meet again. If so, remember me as kindly as you can. Where is your hat?"

"I am afraid they took her away in such haste that they neglected to provide that useful article," replied Ned.

"Anita, go to my house and bring the small hat with the golden band. Be as quick as you can, for they ought to go away at once. What is that shouting outside? You ought to keep your men in better order, Blanchard."

"They are a set of devil's babies," replied Blanchard. "There is only one man who can keep them quiet, but I will do my best."

He left the room and the cabin, but the excitement did not cease! Anita came back in a moment, with a sort of riding-hat of soft felt, with a drooping feather in a golden band. Coral took it from her hand and placed it upon Lilly's head. Then she unclasped a bracelet from her wrist and put it upon the girl's.

"Keep that in memory of me. This tumult is horrible. Ned, I wonder what it can mean? Surely they are not mad enough to rebel against my authority vested in my trusty Blanchard!"

The uproar outside became greater, and seemed to approach the cabin.

"You must go away at once, Ned," said Coral.

"Not yet!" cried a commanding voice. "Not without my consent."

Ned Clayton started back in dismay, for there, standing in the doorway, regarding him with an evil eye, stood—Tom Duke!

CHAPTER X.

THE TABLES TURNED—DUKE'S ALLIES.

How had he escaped?

We left him in the cellar at Hardin's Ranch, heavily ironed, and apparently as far from all hope of escape as a man could be; but there he was, in flesh and blood, a look of malignant triumph in his dark eyes. He now flung off his hat and wig, tore away his yellow beard, straightened his bent back and appeared to add three or four inches to his height by the act, and stood there erect as an Indian, and with as little mercy in his breast as one of that evil race, and there was unmistakable triumph in his face as he said:

"Not yet, my boy; oh, no!"

Coral sprang into his arms with a glad cry, for, bad and cruel as he was, this woman had given him the priceless treasure of her love.

Taken without his disguise, he was an aristocratic-looking man, with a face of marble—a man whom nothing could turn aside from any course which he had marked out for himself, and who would never forgive an injury. He kissed Coral's lips, and then put her gently from him.

"You will have to postpone the little excursion which you have marked out for yourself, my dear Ned," he said, coolly. "I have come back, you see."

Ned saw that he was in deadly peril, and that it was a moment to think and act quickly. Making a sudden leap, he flung Duke aside and ran out into the open air, where he found himself in the midst of a strong party of the outlaws, upon whom he flung himself desperately, hurling them right and left in the strength of despair, and with unparalleled bravery almost breaking through. Bennett threw himself in the way, but was felled like an ox, and for a moment it seemed that the brave youth would escape, but a huge ruffian stealing up behind, struck him with a heavy club, and he fell. A dozen hands seized him, and, half stunned and bleeding, he was dragged into the presence of Tom Duke, struggling and defiant to the last.

"Now, my fighting chicken," said the outlaw, "I think you have reached the end of your rope. I told you at Hardin's Ranch that you would repent having turned traitor, and I hope you see your folly now."

"I only repent one thing," replied Ned, reeling from the effort of the terrible blow he had received.

"And what is that?"

"That Captain Hardin came between us while I had you by the throat. Come, finish me now; you'll be sorry if you don't."

"Time enough, my boy; plenty of time, so don't be in such a hurry to die. We really can not spare you yet, and I have several questions to ask before we work you off. But, there shall be no unnecessary delay, I assure you."

"But, Tom," said Coral, grasping his arm, "you surely do not mean that you will kill him?"

"Silence, Coral. The young rascal knows our laws and accepted the danger when he turned traitor. Why, it is as much as my life is worth to attempt to save him now, and I have no inclination to do it. He deserves to die, and die he shall."

"You never refused me any thing before, Tom," she pleaded. "Spare his life; he is young, too young to die such a death, and if he has done any wrong he will atone for it."

"Ask him if he will join us again and keep his oath. I know he would break it, but you may ask him."

"You are sorry for what you have done, Ned?" said Coral, turning to the young man. "You will be true to us in the future, will you not?"

"I wish I could say that with honor," replied Ned; "but I can not. I never will join their infamous band again."

"You see," said Tom Duke, sternly. "He is hardened and would sooner die than give up. Bennett, you will take him in charge; and remember, if he escapes, you answer for it in your own person. Do you understand me?"

Bennett nodded with a grim smile, and calling in two or three of his subordinates, bound the prisoner, and prepared to lead him away.

"Your evil deeds will one day find you out, Tom Duke," cried the brave young man. "I may die, and I am ready to meet death; but there are those upon your track who will never leave you until you sleep under the grass of the prairie. And if you lay a finger upon Lillian Hardin—"

"Enough of that. Bennett, drag him away, and stop his mouth if he persists in talking. The young scoundrel deserves a worse fate than we can give him."

"You can not frighten me, coward and outlaw," replied Ned. "Lilly, good-by; I did the best I could for you."

Lillian threw herself at Tom Duke's feet and held up her hands pleadingly, while he looked down at her in unalloyed triumph.

"This is something, at least, after years of waiting," he said. "My revenge has commenced, and if they only knew whose work it was, I would be satisfied. But they shall know. You may as well rise, Miss Hardin; you will plead in vain for that young traitor, and your father's daughter does not look well kneeling at my feet."

Lillian rose, her face flushing proudly.

"I am glad you spoke of my father," she said. "He will not forget us, and I should not be surprised if he were close upon your heels with all his brave men."

"We will try to receive him with the hon-

ors of war," said Duke, with a smile. "Coral, I give this young lady into your charge, and I expect you to see to it that she does not escape."

"Do not make me her jailer, Tom, for assure as you do, I will help her to escape," replied Coral, promptly.

"You are certainly candid, my dear Coral," said Duke, laughing; "but I think I will trust you still, for I hardly think you would suffer any one to escape who would put your husband's life in peril, and I give you my word that if she gets away there is no safety for me in Texas."

The head of Coral dropped upon her bosom. He had taken the only way to secure her aid—through her love for him. He stood looking at her a moment, with a look half of remorse, half admiration, and then ordered the men who were clustered about the door to move back and permit the passage of Bennett and the prisoner. Ned went out with a proud look upon his noble young face, and even the men who desired his death were forced to admire him. Lilly had retreated to the shelter of Coral's arms, and reposing her head upon the woman's bosom, was sobbing as if her heart would break.

"Come, Coral," said Duke, "bring your charge with you to our cabin. I little thought once that I should be glad of such a shelter; but life is full of strange vicissitudes."

He went out first, pushing his way through the ranks of the men, pausing now and then to shake hands with a favorite, or to ask some question, and made his way to a cabin more neatly built than any of the others, the door of which stood open. A negro woman was laying the cloth for a meal, as they came in, who looked delighted at the sight of Duke.

"Good hebbens, Marse Tom," she said, "you done got 'way from dem rangers? T'ought you done gone up dis time, Marse Tom—I did, for shure."

"I'm all right, Jinny," said Duke, laughing lightly. "The time had not come for me to be laid by the heels, but when it does, I believe I shall have a sincere mourner in you. Is breakfast nearly ready? I'm as hungry as a hunter."

"Mcs' ready, Marse Tom. G'long—you knows what raal cookin' is, you does. Don't 'low no low-lived truck to beat me cookin', dat I don't! Goodness gracious! who dat? Fader above, dat's my young missee—dat's Miss 'Rie!"

Tom Duke hesitated and looked blank for a moment, and then laughed again.

"So you see the resemblance, do you, Jinny? I might have known it, for I see in her exactly what her mother was at her age. This is Miss 'Rie's daughter."

The old negress approached Lilly and gazed long and earnestly into her face.

"You's bootiful, young missee," she said at last. "I nebber hoped to see anudder ob de ole stock ag'in, and sart'in not de chile ob my dear Missee 'Rie. I hope she well, chile—you tell me dat."

"My mother is very well," said Lilly. "But who are you?"

"Let me answer for you," said Duke. "This is Jinny, one of your mother's old family servants. No matter how she came into my possession, or who I am? It is enough for you to know who she is, and I warn you, Jinny, under pain of my displeasure, never to speak my name to this young lady."

"Good hebbens! you don't s'pose I let out on you, Marse Tom!" replied Jinny. "Kil Her fader an' you not so frienly to one anudder dat I tole who you be. I didn't think he let his darter come an' see you."

"I am not here of my own accord, Jinny," said Lillian, quickly. "I am a prisoner."

"Donno nuffin 'bout dat," said Jinny, with the vacant look which a slave knows how to assume. "Marse Tom he 'tend to all dat, I reckon, an' it won't do for an ole nigger woman to interfere; she knows better. Got forty lashes for dat once, and don't want 'em ag'in, I don't."

"Get the breakfast on the table, Jinny," said Coral, impatiently. "What nonsense you are talking now."

"You don't 'spect sense in me, Missee Coral?" said Jinny, with a laugh. "Dat's too curi's, dat is. De idea ob sense in an ole nigger woman! Ki; dat too funny, dat is."

In spite of her assumed humility, there was something in the manner of the negress which gave Lilly hope, and she was wise enough to say nothing to her. Two or three times in the course of the meal their eyes met, and she saw a strange look in the twinkling black orbs of the negress, which she could not understand.

"I have not asked you how you escaped, dear Tom?" said Coral. "Ned Clayton said you were in irons."

"So I was," replied Duke; "but I have a way of my own of getting out of irons when they are not too tight. I freed myself from the shackles, squeezed myself out of the window, stole a horse, and was off. I had to make a circuit to avoid some Indians, and that made me late, or I believe that I should have been here to receive Master Ned Clayton in person. But it is just as well; I was in time to do the work."

"I wish you would let Ned go, or at least spare his life, even if you keep him a prisoner."

"You ask too much, Coral. There are not many things which I would refuse you, as I think you know, but this is impossible. Our safety depends upon the destruction of this boy, who has the intellect of an Arnold, and the same traitorous disposition. Once free, he would leave no stone unturned to thwart my plans, and we should not be safe for a moment. He must die, and you only make trouble by talking of him."

"He is so brave and noble-hearted in every thing else, that I cannot bear to see him suffer. If he would promise to leave Texas and not return, would you let him go?"

"He would come back, Coral—he would come back—and the magnet which would draw him is not far away. Leave me to attend to him, and as the men vote, so it shall be. They know what is best for their own safety."

"We took an Indian prisoner last evening—a man who Blanchard says is Black Feather, the son of Single Hand. He—"

"You did him no harm, I hope?" cried Duke, starting up.

"He escaped during the night, and although he was treated somewhat roughly when captured, I hardly think he was hurt."

"You have made a mistake in capturing him at all," replied Duke. "He came here with friendly intentions, and perhaps we have now alienated his father. However, we must repair the wrong, if possible, and at once; so tell Bennett to prepare to accompany me to the prairie."

Half an hour after, the outlaw rode out with two men, and returned before noon, accompanied by four or five Indians, one of whom was the young chief taken the night before, who looked sternly about upon the faces of the outlaws as if seeking the man who had struck him down the night before. But, Pedro prudently kept out of sight, as he had no wish to meet the Indian now. Riding by the side of Tom Duke was the gigantic chief whom Lilly had seen before, Single Hand; a truly appalling figure in his war-paint. He seemed to be upon friendly terms with Duke, and looked about on the camp with the eye of a warrior, and appeared to think well of his associates.

They dismounted at the door of Duke's cabin, and as they entered, Lillian shrunk away, awed by the terrible appearance of the great chief, who looked at her admiringly, although the dark beauty of Coral pleased him best.

"My brother has beautiful wives," he said. "Single Hand has none like them in his lodge."

"The old rip," muttered Blanchard, who was with the party. "Perhaps he would like one of these?"

"This is my wife," said Duke, pointing to Coral. "The other is the child of your enemy and mine, Captain Hardin."

"Ha!" cried the chief, fiercely. "Hardin is a dog and many of the Comanche have fallen by his hand. Let him beware of Single Hand, chief of the Comanche! His coming is as the rushing of a mighty wind and his blows as terrible as the stroke of the lightning. When he hates he strikes, and his enemies wither before him as the prairie under the fire."

There was something strikingly impressive in the attitude of the great chief, and Lilly, much as she feared him, was deeply touched by his manner. She could not understand his words, but his gestures were commanding and his eyes kindled as he spoke. She turned from him and her eye met that of Black Feather, who was looking at her intently. As their eyes met he smiled, and she knew that, in the young warrior, she had found a friend.

"Leave us, Coral," said Duke. "We have some private business."

Coral took Lilly by the hand and led her out of the cabin and into the forest beyond the clearing. They had not gone far when they were overtaken by Black Feather, who had made some excuse for leaving the cabin. He at once approached, bending before them with a courtly grace which would have done credit to a knight.

"Black Feather can not much speak white

man talk," he said, quickly. "But see; he is a friend of the Golden Hair, and would not see her wronged. She saved him from white man knife; he save her now—all same."

"You can not help me now," said the girl, eagerly, "but you can help one whom I love."

"Stay," said Coral. "I must not hear this, although I hope that you will succeed in your undertaking. Let me go away for a moment and leave you together. You do not fear to be left alone with this young chief, Lilly?"

Without a moment's hesitation she answered "No," and Black Feather drew a long breath of relief.

"The Golden Hair is wise beyond her years, and can read the heart of the Comanche. She is safe with Black Feather, who would not hurt a hair in her head to save his life."

Coral moved away and stood under the shadow of a great tree, out of hearing, but from which she could warn them of the approach of an enemy. Lilly and the Indian remained for a moment in close consultation, and then he moved away and Coral came back.

"Don't tell me anything, dear Lilly, cried the creole, eagerly. "You had better keep it a secret if you have formed any plan, for it would be my duty to tell the truth if my husband asked the question."

"I shall tell you nothing," answered Lilly; "but that young Indian has a noble heart—a heart which would do credit to any white man. You will probably hear something before morning."

They went back to the camp but did not enter the cabin, as the leaders were still in consultation. An hour after, while they were sitting in Blanchard's cabin, that worthy came in, looking flushed and angry.

"I'll tell you what it is, madam," he said, addressing Coral, "your husband carries matters with too high a hand. I, for one, did not join a party of kidnappers. I knew that they were rascals, but I did not think they were of the mean kind."

"What is the matter, Blanchard?" said Coral.

"The matter is that, as soon as this present work is done, I quit. I've been asked to league with Indians in the meanest plot—See here; I'll go out on the plains and fight the savages as long as life lasts, but I'll be—no, I won't swear—if I'll kidnap any more women. And don't let them give me a chance, or Ned Clayton will get away, sure."

Lillian made a signal which Coral understood, and she left the room, leaving them together. What Lillian said to him did not transpire until afterward, but Blanchard went out, whistling, with a happy look on his face. That night, or rather next morning, Tom Duke was called out by one of the men and led to the cabin where Ned Clayton was confined. He found Bennett lying senseless upon the earth, bound hand and foot with a gag thrust into his mouth. There were marks of several feet upon the earth, but chiefly moccasin-tracks which it would be hard to identify.

"You needn't tell me what has happened," said Duke, fiercely. "The boy has escaped."

"It wasn't our fault, captain. Jim Bagley is dead and Bennett pretty nigh it, and the boy gone."

Duke stood a moment in thought, with his hand upon a knife, and then stooping he cut the cords which bound Bennett.

"Call up the men, Timpon. Get out Blanchard and tell him that we march in half an hour. There is not a moment to be lost."

The outlaws wasted no time. Half an hour later the camp was deserted, and the jaguar and the prairie wolf struggled with each other for the debris of the deserted place.

CHAPTER XI.

A PRAIRIE BATTLE.

THE escape of Tom Duke was reported to Captain Hardin early in the morning. No one could be blamed for it, as it was evident that he had slipped off the irons—a trick of which few men were capable. The rangers were at once called together, and leaving three men in charge of the house, they rode out toward Deep Gully, where a preconcerted signal called out Jack, who was hidden in the bushes, and who heard the news of Duke's escape with great alarm.

"He'll kill Fred Clayton!" he said—"he'll kill him as sure as fate. I wouldn't give a picayune for his chance of being alive, twenty-four hours from now."

"Do you know where their camp is, Jack?" said the captain.

"No, I don't, captain. You see I've been in another part of the State, for this land has

branches all through the South, and I don't know where they corner themselves any more than a dead man. It's deep in the chaparral—that's all I kin say about it."

"Then our only hope is to lay back and watch," said Hardin, "and to send out scouts in every direction. If they see any man going into the chaparral, they must mark the spot and come back to report."

Half a dozen men, receiving their instructions, set out at once. Just before dusk they came back, one by one, and reported that they had seen several men enter the chaparral at different points, and that a large body of Indians, perhaps a hundred in all, were camped in a gulch, about five miles to the north.

"The band of Single Hand, I'll bet any money," said Jack. "There is some kind of an agreement between Duke and that Injin, so that they work together this season, though what the agreement is I don't know."

"We can not do any thing to-night," said the captain. "The only way is to get into the chaparral near the place where the boys saw the men going in, and hunt for sign in the morning. How many do you think Duke can muster, Jack?"

"About forty, I should say. A good many of them are off on duty."

"Horse-stealing?"

"You bet!"

"Are they fighting men, Jack?"

"Blood-lappers, every man of them, except Jim Blanchard, and he's too good a chap to be in the business."

The band of rangers numbered fifty men. They knew that the outlaws combined with the savages would make a tough job for them, yet they had no fear, and at the orders of the captain rode out after dusk and entered the chaparral without seeing any of their enemies. The horses were led into the bushes and picketed safely, and, after setting his guards, Captain Hardin wrapped his blanket about him and lay down to rest.

The night passed and they were again in the saddle, working carefully about in the thicket until they found a trail and followed it to the end, and, as they hoped, it took them to the camp, deserted for some hours.

"Curse the luck!" cried Hardin. "They have taken the alarm and are off."

"Search about," said Jack. "If they have finished Ned Clayton you'll find him hanging somewhere."

The men scattered through the woods but found no trace of their new ally, and began to hope that he had escaped. But, in their search, they found a fresh trail leading to the north, and quickly satisfied themselves that this was the course taken by the outlaws in leaving the camp.

"The dirty thieves," cried old Joe. "They don't want to meet a free ranger—they don't. They'd rather strike up a ranch or steal horses or niggers—that's what they'd like to do."

"They're a hard lot, Joe," said the reclaimed outlaw. "It's a wonder to me that I ever consorted with them, but, to tell you the truth, I was awfully down on my luck, and I liked Ned Clayton. If they have killed him some ha'r has got to be lifted, and I'm the boy to do the job."

"We must follow them," said the captain; "that is the only way, and we must not waste time. Bob Farrell and Tim Driscoll may take the trail as advance scouts and we will follow."

No effort had been made to conceal the trail, and it was easy to follow forty horses over such a ground as that. The course led them through the chaparral in places where the most natural conformation was "Indian file," in which order they proceeded, the scouts beating every thicket before they allowed the rest to follow. It was plain that Duke had not expected to have them upon the trail so soon or he would have laid an ambush in some of the difficult places over which they were compelled to pass.

After a ride of nearly four miles the path became more open, and soon after they came out into a bush-prairie, not far from the spot where the scouts had seen the Indians the day before.

"Halt here," cried Hardin. "Let Tim Driscoll scout up toward the Indian camp and see if they are there still."

Driscoll, a rollicking Irishman, but a capital scout in many respects, threw his bridle to the next man, took his rifle and stole away through the bushes. Five minutes later his clear whistle announced that they might advance, and they found him standing on a little rise in the prairie, looking out upon the Indian camp, which was also deserted.

"The devils seem to scent us this morning," cried the captain, in a disappointed tone, "and

they have probably joined their forces before this. It will be a bear-fight when we do meet, for we have no right to despise Single Hand and his men. What is that, Tracy?"

One of the men came forward and put in his hand a fragment of muslin which he had found fluttering upon a bush. He recognized it at once as a portion of the dress which Lillian had worn the day of her capture.

"They have her then," he murmured. "What can be this man's plot in making her a prisoner? I do not understand it."

"He hates you for some reason, captain," replied Jack, "and takes the girl as a means of striking a blow at you."

"I should not wonder if that was his plan, but it is cowardly in a man to strike at one whom he hates through a weak girl. He will live to repent it, or my name is not Hardin. What do you say, boys; dare we follow these bloody scoundrels?"

A cheer burst from the throats of the rangers, and Hardin knew that they were ready to follow him to the very death.

"All right, boys," he said. "I ought not to have asked you the question, for I knew that you were true men to the last gasp. Ride on; Driscoll, take the advance."

Tim Driscoll was again in the saddle, and led them into the Indian camp. It was evident that they had not been gone over an hour, for the ashes of their fires were yet warm as the scouts turned them over, and a broad trail led away to the south.

"They are bold to take that direction," said the captain. "Surely, they cannot know that we have left the ranch?"

"I don't think they do, captain, but, they are so strong now that they don't care for us," said Jack. "I think it lays in our bones to teach them a thing or two about that, yet."

"We will try, at any rate," said the captain, as the leading scout dashed out of the camp at a great pace. "Confound their impudence, we will teach them who are masters on this border."

The trail led along the edge of the chaparral and then turned off in the direction of Deep Gulch. As they approached this point they saw an Indian and a white man running at full speed to gain the cover of the thicket, and by a wave of his hand the captain detached four men to run them down.

The mustangs, as they felt the spur, darted away at their best speed and were rapidly overhauling the fugitives, when Jack, who was leading the chase, suddenly uttered a shout of delight, and raising his fingers to his mouth gave a peculiar whistle, at the sound of which the white man, who was about to plunge into the thicket, turned toward the pursuers and cried out to the Indian to come back. Hardin saw Jack Evans dash up at full speed, and, instead of striking the white man down, spring from his saddle and grasp his hand in a friendly manner, while the other three crowded about him, with many demonstrations of joyful surprise.

"Ride on," said Hardin. "Who the deuce can it be?"

The rangers came on, and as they neared the group at the edge of the chaparral they saw that Ned Clayton was among them, his face radiant with joy. Hardin leaped from his saddle and embraced him warmly.

"Next to the safety of Lilly I am delighted to see you free, my dear Ned," he said. "How were you used?"

"Badly enough," replied Ned. "Tom Duke slipped the buckle, and got away just in time to nab me as I was leaving the camp with Lillian."

"Who is this Indian?" said the captain, looking hard at Ned's companion.

"Black Feather, the son of Single Hand. Keep back, boys; the man that touches him in anger must fight me, for, but for his help, I should now be hanging to a branch in yonder chaparral. He saved me for Lillian's sake, and must be allowed to go unquestioned."

"Why for Lillian's sake? I do not understand. Keep back, boys; don't press upon them so."

"It seems that Lilly saved him from the knives of the outlaws, in some way, I don't exactly know how myself, and so he aided in my escape. There was another man who had something to do with it, whose name is Blanchard—you know him, Jack—one of the best fellows in Texas. Whatever happens, Jim Blanchard must not be hurt."

"Remember to point that man out when we get in a fight," said the captain. "Does the Indian wish to go now?"

Black Feather inclined his head in a stately manner.

"Comanehe," said Hardin, speaking in the Indian tongue, "we are at war, but you and I cannot be enemies. Remember that if the time ever comes when I can help you, in any manner, you have only to speak and I will do it."

"My white brother is wise," said Black Feather. "If all white men were like him there would be no war between the Comanches and Texans. Is Black Feather free to go?"

"Certainly; I am not the man to detain you."

The Indian going into the bushes brought out two horses, and placed the lariat of the best in Ned Clayton's hand.

"See, my brother," he said; "Black Feather gives you this horse, that you may not forget him. If we meet in battle, let the man who is bravest slay the other and take his scalp. Black Feather has kept his word."

"I will never seek the scalp of the son of Single Hand," replied Ned. "On the contrary, if we meet in battle let us fight some other man, rather than strike at each other."

"It is good," said Black Feather. "The son of Single Hand will not strike at the bosom of the man who is his friend."

He sprang into the saddle, waved them a stately adieu, and rode away at full speed across the plain, until a roll in the prairie hid him from sight. The rangers again took the trail and rode for ten miles without meeting an enemy, but the trail freshened as they proceeded, and presently the scouts in advance came back at a gallop.

"Here they come, Cap; they make dust enough for an army."

Captain Hardin called his men to a halt, and dashed forward to the top of the ridge. Some distance in front he could see a body of men advancing, seemingly five times the number of his own force, but a second glance revealed the truth. They were driving before them a great cavalcade of horses, fastened together by means of lariats.

"They have struck up some ranch," he cried. "Back, men; we can find a better ground than this to attack them."

The rangers silently drew back, and, concealed from view by the clouds of dust raised by the advancing drove of horses, took their station behind a thick growth of bushes in order for a charge. Each man sat with his rifle upon his knee at the full cock, ready for action at a moment's notice, their pistols charged. The cavalcade passed on, and as they came abreast of the position of the rangers, a withering volley was poured in, before which many of the Comanches bit the dust. A wild charge followed, accompanied by yells which would have shamed the Indian war-cry. This sudden attack, coming from a quarter whence they least expected it, took the Indians by surprise, and, before they had recovered, the rangers were upon them and the pistols had begun their deadly work. To add to their confusion, the long lines of captured horses wheeled and darted back among them, throwing them into the utmost confusion. Unable to extricate themselves from the press, the red-skins were shot down without mercy, and when the smoke of the battle rolled away many bloody corpses cumbered the gory sod, and only a small number, and many of these wounded, had managed to escape.

The surprise had been so complete that the loss of the rangers was very slight. One man only was badly wounded and several others had flesh-wounds, not one of them so severe as to disable the sufferers. The rangers scattered about the plain, engaged in the duty of scalping the dead, for the Texans imitated the savage foe in this respect and the trophy had the additional value of drawing a bounty.

When this was done they began to collect the scattered horses. Captain Hardin and Ned had not dismounted, after the battle, nor taken part in mutilating the dead, although they regarded it as the legitimate result of an Indian battle. As the captured horses were brought in the captain started and turned pale, for he recognized his mark, and knew that the animals had come from his own corrals. He looked south and saw a thick black smoke rising above the next roll in the prairie.

"My God, Joe, these are my horses. Leave five men to collect them and come on, for they struck my ranch!"

The old ranger obeyed, after satisfying himself that none of Tom Duke's force were among the slain and that Single Hand had escaped. The distance to the ranch was a little over seven miles, and they went on at a long, slugging trot as much as their horses would bear

after their late exertions. As they went they saw evidences of destruction on every hand. Stock-buts and corrals were in confusion, the gates down, and here and there the body of a Mexican herdsman scalped and gory could be seen. The stout captain groaned in agony. A moment more and he would know the worst, for only one ridge lay between him and his ranch—the home where he had been happy so long. The pace they were going was now tremendous, and as they reached the crest of the slope a cry of execration burst from every lip.

The ranch lay before them, but in ruins, and the smoke was rising from the burning pile. Hardin uttered a cry which was almost a scream of agony, and dashing the rowels into his horse's flanks, darted down the slope, closely followed by his men, furious with passion. Tom Duke had done his work but too well!

CHAPTER XII. THE WIFE'S DOOM.

CAPTAIN HARDIN was a strong man, but as he looked upon the smoking ruins of his once happy home, he covered his face with his hands and gave utterance to a despairing groan. Scattered about on the sod and among the blackened embers, lay the gory bodies of the victims of savage hate. Some, no doubt, lay beneath the smoldering ruins, burned out of the semblance of humanity. Where was his wife? Could it be possible that she had perished with the rest? He knew that Tom Duke was a villain, but that he could have been so base as to murder that good woman, seemed hardly possible.

"Come, captain," said Ned, kindly laying his hand upon his shoulder. "Bear up like a man. I know that Tom Duke would not allow your wife to be killed; that was not his plan."

"You think she is a prisoner, then?" cried the captain, eagerly.

"Certainly, and that no doubt is the reason he separated from the Indians. He had found that you were gone, and would no doubt come back on the east side of the gulch, and he had no wish to meet you. We will run him to earth and get the ladies back, or die trying it. What do you say, men?"

The rangers set up a stunning cheer, and a hopeful expression passed over the face of the captain.

"Then I swear never to turn back from the pursuit while life lasts, until my dear ones are saved. You are with me, boys; let us see what old rangers can do. Let us ride back and meet the horses, pick out fresh ones, and away again on the trail."

It was no sooner said than the party were again in motion, headed back toward the plain where the few remaining stockmen were gathering in the scattered animals. As they rode along a faint voice called to them from some bushes by the wayside, and little Pomp, the house-waiter, bleeding from a wound in the thigh, crawled out to meet them.

"Oh, massa, dear massa, you come too late. Dem ragin' debbles done took Missee 'Rie 'way, dey did!"

"Who did?"

"Dem robbers an' Injines. Dey come altogedder, an' kill Pete and Eph and Jake Snyder, and dem greasers, and tote Missee 'Rie 'way on a hoss; I see'd 'em."

"That is proof positive that I was right, captain," said Ned. "Which way did they go, Pomp?"

"Dey tuk up de wes' side ob de valley, Marse Ned; dis chile see'd 'em."

Ned dismounted and looked at the boy's wounded thigh, washed it in spirits, bound it up and told him to lie down in the shade and they would send the stockmen after him. When they reached the corral they found the men passing in the animals, one by one, and after picking out fresh horses and giving the men their instructions, the rangers rode away upon the trail of Tom Duke. Woe to him and his ruffian band if they were overtaken!

Lillian passed the hours before day in riding with Coral through the chaparral. Her heart was more at ease, for Coral had whispered to her that Ned had escaped, and that she would aid her at the first opportunity. No such chance came, however, for Tom rode close beside them, watching every movement, and it was literally impossible for the girl to get away.

About three in the morning, they reached the Indian camp, and the bandit chief gave them blankets and told them to lie down until he called them, but in order to insure their safety, he put a guard over them both, laughingly saying

that Coral needed watching as much as Lillian.

"Have you lost confidence in me, then, Tom?" said Coral, sadly.

"I won't say that, my dear Coral," he replied; "but you are too soft-hearted for this wicked world, and have taken a fancy to this young lady. Under the circumstances, and in consideration of the fact that one prisoner has escaped already, I think it safest to put a guard near you. Your eyes might close accidentally, and this girl get away."

Coral turned away with a sinking heart, and the two beautiful women lay down, wrapped in each other's arms, and soon fell asleep. When they were called up the camp was in motion, and the Indians already were preparing their homely meal, while the outlaws were making more elaborate preparations for breakfast.

Coral and Lillian arose and set about preparing food for themselves; and when it was done, Duke came over and joined them.

"We are in a hurry, this morning, Coral, and with your permission I will join you at breakfast."

"Where are you going, Tom?" asked Coral. "You might tell me that."

"I might," he replied, laughing; "but, on the whole, I think I will not do so. It is a sort of business better kept from women's ears. You will know soon enough. To-day my revenge will be complete, and then good-by to Texas forever and a day!"

"You refuse to give me your confidence," said Coral, proudly. "I did not think that time would ever come."

"Nor I, Coral. You do not know why I refuse to tell you this, but, one day, I will make my actions good to you. What is that you have—coffee? Give me a cup, for I am very thirsty."

"I will ask you no more questions," said Coral, drawing herself up proudly.

"That is just as well, my dear. I do not propose to be pumped in the presence of company, you may be sure of that. Give me a rib of that venison; thanks."

Coral understood, now, that he refused to speak on account of Lillian's presence, and said no more. When their hasty meal was concluded they were helped to the saddle, and the whole party, accompanied by the Indians, rode away to the south, with scouts spurring to and fro upon either flank, to warn them of the approach of an enemy. In this order they proceeded until the smoke of Hardin's Ranch could be seen above the ridge, when the captain called a halt and held a consultation with Single Hand.

"I leave the stock-yards and men about them to you, chief," he said. "As for the house-servants, it will be no trick to attend to them with my own men."

The chief nodded gravely.

"Where shall we meet again when the work is done, my brother?"

"At the place where we camped last night. As soon as you have killed the stockmen and taken the horses, drive them away, and we will follow and overtake you by the time you get to the camp."

The arrangement pleased the chief, as by it he would have the most valuable portion of the spoils in his own hands. The outlaw rode back and spoke to Coral.

"You will stay here with a guard of five men, Coral. Keep the girl with you, for I do not wish her to see the destruction of her father's house, much as I hate him. Davis, Belton, Floyd, Timpson and Dean, ride out of the ranks."

The men thus called by name obeyed orders.

"These ladies are in your charge, boys. In case anything happens to us, you will make what speed you can to the old place in the Northwest range. Davis is in command of the detachment."

"I wish you would give me charge, captain," said Jim Blanchard. "I am not particularly struck after this business you are about to do; it ain't in my line."

"Just as you like, Jim. Davis, come back into the ranks, and Blanchard will take command."

Lillian was pleased at the change, for the frank manner of Blanchard had won with her from the first. She knew that a deadly peril hung over her old home, but she could see no way to avert it.

"I will not waste my breath in idle entreaty, sir," she said, but may God deal with you as you do with me and mine."

"On my head be it," was the laughing reply. "Fall in boys; forward."

The outlaws now took the advance, and the

Indians followed at a slashing pace—the latter turning to the right and left to attack the horse corrals. The white men dashed down the road and never drew bridle until they reached the ranch; which was already in confusion. The faithful house-servants, sprung at once to their arms, closed the doors and windows, and prepared to defend the place to the last.

"Curse the black thieves!" said Duke. "They will make us trouble, after all, and no one suspected them of fighting intentions. Dismount, boys; leave the usual horse-guards and make a rush."

The negroes in the house were well armed, for the house was at all times a perfect arsenal, being the head-quarters of the rangers. The people in the building were under the charge of Jake Snyder, a gigantic mulatto, who infused something of his fighting spirit into the rest.

"You go in de cellar, Missee 'Rie," he said. "We fight to de las' drop of our blood for you."

"My brave fellows," cried Mrs. Hardin, "you will only waste your blood in vain."

"Nebber you min' us. P'raps ef we make noise enuff, de massa heah us an' come to our help. Go down cellar, quick!"

She obeyed him, just as the outlaws made a determined rush at the house, in which they were nobly met by the black servants, and for a time held in check. But, axes were sounding upon doors and windows, which were soon broken down, and the white demons came swarming in. While crowded into the opening of the great hall, the negroes fired together, causing dreadful slaughter, and then retreated to the door of the cellar, and began to reload hastily. Fearful that they would fire again, Duke ordered a rush at them, when they clubbed their rifles and for a time kept the foe at bay. Jake fought like a Paladin, and two of the outlaws had fallen under the sweep of his powerful arm, when Tom Duke drew a pistol and lifted it carelessly.

"Give yourselves up, you black devils," he hissed.

"No," shouted Pete; "we die fust!"

"Take that, then, to end your folly," said Duke. The pistol came to a level, the hammer fell, and the brave negro dropped, shot through the heart. His fall disheartened the rest, and though they still struggled, it was not long before they were beaten down, man by man, and the ranch was captured.

"Throw the carrion away from that door," cried Duke. "Remember that the man who harms Mrs. Hardin dies by my hand."

The bodies of the negroes and those whom they had stricken down were thrown aside, and Tom Duke entered the cellar, followed by some of his men. Mrs. Hardin had heard enough to convince her that the blacks had resisted nobly, but the sudden pause in the tumult told her that they had been conquered, and she advanced to meet her enemies.

"I give myself up," she said, proudly. "Do with me as you will."

Tom Duke averted his face and ordered her to ascend the stairs before him. Villain as he was he could not meet the glance of the pure eyes of the woman he had loved vainly but well, years before—at least not yet. Two men took her in charge and led her out of the house to the rear of the horses, where they waited orders. In the meantime those of the servants who had not resisted, women and boys, were brought out, tied two and two and conveyed to the rear. Then, by the orders of Duke, a quantity of combustible material was piled in a small closet and he set fire to it with his own hand.

"Hardin will come back to a ruined home," he muttered. "Oh, that he could only know whose hand had dealt the blow!"

He left the house and watched the curling flames gradually ascending the wooden wall, and lapping up the light material and sending up a clear flame with but little smoke. An expression of horrible delight crossed his face.

"My work is done," he cried, "and now hurrah for Mexico!"

The outlaws mounted and fell back a little, carrying with them every portable article of value which they had found within the building. Mrs. Hardin, with her face buried in her hands, was weeping as if her heart would break, when some one touched her on the shoulder, and she looked up to see Tom Duke standing beside her, pointing with demoniac glee at the burning building. As she saw his face she uttered a cry of surprise and horror and started back.

"You, Elwood! Had you the heart to do this terrible crime?"

"My work, mine!" he answered. "I told you, long ago, to remember me in the time to

come. When I was driven out, a friendless and homeless outcast, with a price upon my head, my promised wife given to my enemy, my fortune in his hands, I warned you to keep me in mind, for one day I would have revenge. I have it now, and it is sweet."

"It may be sweet to you, Marmaduke Elwood, but your cruel heart has conceived a wicked slander when you say that Hardin ever wronged you."

"Curses—Bah! Why should I waste time in talking of him now, in the moment when my revenge is complete? He shall know that I have avenged the wrong done me, but, as for you, you shall never see his face again. Boot and saddle, boys; take the west side of the gulch and forward!"

A horse had been provided for her and she rode away with the hand of Duke Elwood—Tom Duke—upon her bridle-rein. His eyes shone with a strange triumph, and yet there was a sort of pity in them too.

"If you had kept faith with me," he said, slowly, "all might have been well. Say that I killed a man who had insulted me—what of that? Neither had deserved better at my hands."

"You wrong me still; I never promised to be your wife."

"No; but you had half-promised when this noble cousin of mine, James Hardin, came to Baton Rouge. There, say no more; you are married and my wife is yonder, but I will finish my revenge all the same."

"What will you do?"

"You shall know in the future, and when I have revealed your fate to you, I doubt not that you will say that I know how to avenge a wrong."

At this moment they were joined by Coral and Lillian. The sweet child sprung from the saddle and hurried to meet her mother, but Duke Elwood interposed.

"No, no; not by any means. Stand back, my little beauty, for you shall not touch her hand."

Coral heard what he said, and the old furious Spanish blood sprung into new life as she thrust him resolutely back.

"Stand back you, Thomas Duke! I tell you that the child shall go to her mother, whether you are pleased or not."

He looked at her fiercely, and half-raised his clenched hand as if to strike her, but changed his mind, bursting into a strange laugh, and looking at Lillian already locked in her mother's arms.

"You will go too far with me, one day, Coral," he said. "I love you, but my love is not of the texture which endures every thing. When this foolishness is ended, put that girl back on her horse or I will assist her in an unwelcome way."

Lillian withdrew from her mother's arms and mounted her horse again, her face suffused in tears; the cavalcade went up the valley by the light of the burning ranch.

CHAPTER XIII.

A LIFE FOR A LIFE.

At the time when the rangers were engaged in the battle with the band of Single Hand, the outlaws were about ten miles to the east, near enough to hear the sounds of the battle. Duke Elwood smiled satirically, and said to Blanchard:

"It was a good thought of mine, sending the Indians away with the cattle. I was tolerably certain that they would fall in with the rangers, and get trounced, and in doing so delay Hardin in his return to the ranch. Hurry up the men; we need not think to fight them on this open plain."

Blanchard turned somewhat sullenly and shouted the order to the men. The pace became a brisk trot, for none of them had any wish to fall in with the rangers, although, like most men, they would fight well when driven into a corner. Three hours after they reached the verge of the chaparral and plunged into its depths. Mrs. Hardin, Lillian, Coral and Duke Elwood were among the last to enter, the first two reluctantly enough, for they knew how hard their rescue would be when once they were in the depths of the forest.

"Leave all hope behind as you enter this place," said Duke Elwood. "Think that you have looked for the last time upon your husband's face, Maria, for you shall never see him more. You are doomed to a life which will be some revenge for all that I have suffered."

Maria Hardin answered him by a look of proud disdain, and he ordered her savagely to ride on. She obeyed without a word and followed the band by devious paths to the deep

fastness in the chaparral, not the one which they had formerly occupied, but another far more remote from the reach of helping hands.

Duke assisted them to descend and led them to a simple hut of boughs, which he ordered them to enter by a wave of the hand. Coral alone remained without.

"A word with you, husband," she said. "I have always loved and honored you, but it can not be that you mean to take vengeance upon two weak women for the offense of another? You have desolated their home; is not that enough for you?"

"Silence, Coral; follow them into the hut, and see to it that I hear no more from you upon the subject. This is my business, and I will not allow you to interfere with it, in any way."

She said no more, but turned from him with a look which he had never seen upon her face before—a look which spoke of rebellion and defiance.

"I fear that I shall be obliged to give my dear wife a lesson," he muttered; "and if I would not have all my plans frustrated, I must see to it that she does not have too much chance to aid them."

He instructed Bennett to set a guard over the prisoners, who were placed under his especial care, and to watch Coral as close as the rest. Two men were then sent through the chaparral to the place appointed as a rendezvous with the Indians, asking Single Hand to join him in his new camp. It would take at least two hours to go and return, and in the mean time something must be done to guard against the approach of Hardin, who would be sure to follow them. Ambushes were set at various points upon the devious road to their place of refuge, but as yet the rangers did not appear. Blanchard made an offer to go to the hiding-place of the women who belonged to the band, and convey them safely to a point where they could be easily picked up when the party left the chaparral, thus leaving the prisoners without a friend. Duke Elwood was glad to get rid of him, for he feared that he did not take kindly to the duty of oppressing women.

"There goes our last friend," said Lilly, who saw him depart through an opening in the hut. "I confess that I had a hope that he would aid us."

"I don't believe that he will desert you," said Coral. "Dear lady, I wish you would teach me to be a good woman. I have been badly taught all my life, and I fear that I love my husband too well, but I can not—I can not aid him in wronging you."

"I believe that you will be true to us," said Mrs. Hardin, "but I fear that you are too outspoken in your words. If you could seem a little colder to us, it would be better perhaps."

"It is hard for me to feign," said Coral, "but, as you say, perhaps it would be better. Here comes my husband."

Duke Elwood entered the hut and told Coral to leave it for awhile.

"Madam," he said, after his wife was gone, "I have come to tell you what disposition I propose to make of you. My ally, Single Hand, has suffered heavily in the fighting of the last few days, and I have reason to believe that all his plunder has been retaken by the rangers. Some amends must be made him, and there is but one course open for me. You shall pay my debt to the chief."

"What can you mean, Duke Elwood? I do not understand your words."

"Then I must endeavor to explain. You shall be given to the chief as his wife. Your daughter shall accompany you, to be disposed of as the chief shall see fit."

"Oh, coward! villain! traitor to every good and true thing! You can not mean what you say; it is too horrible!"

"I will prove to you that I do mean it, before the day is done. Messengers have been sent to the chief, and in an hour or two, at most, he will be here, ready to claim you. When he has done that, I am off for Mexico, satisfied that my work in Texas is completed. There; I do not propose to bandy words with you, but you know your fate."

He turned quickly from the hut, leaving the two prisoners dumbstricken at the horrible vengeance he proposed. As he passed out, Coral put her hand in his arm and walked smilingly by his side through the camp.

"I am afraid I was a little jealous of you, Tom," she said, smiling. "I did not like to have you keep these prisoners, for you have confessed that you loved Mrs. Hardin once."

"Is that all?" he said, laughing. "Then you must set your little heart at rest, for I will

prove to you, before the day is done, that I do not love her now."

"You are going to send them away, then?"

"After to-day, no civilized man will ever see their faces again. I am going to give them as a peace-offering to Single Hand."

It was only by a strong effort of her will that this wonderful woman restrained herself. The plan was too horrible, and for a moment she almost doubted the evidence of her senses.

"Is not that too dreadful, husband? Take them to Mexico, and put them in a convent; they could never get out of that."

He shook his head slowly. "I have thought of that, too, but the priests might ask some awkward questions. No, this is the only way to get rid of them entirely, and I will leave it to Single Hand. There, run away, little one; be assured that I love you as much as ever."

She stood for a moment in the same position, looking wildly after him.

"I will save him from this horrible crime," she murmured. "He is insane upon this one point. Let me think it out."

She went away by herself and sat upon a great tree, in deep thought. While in that position, Single Hand and a small party of Indians passed her swiftly, on their way to the camp.

"The red scoundrel has come to claim them," she thought. "What can I do? oh, what can I do to save them?"

Single Hand came on, his dark brows overcast, and he met the gaze of Duke Elwood with a fierce glance.

"Here am I, Single Hand, chief of the Comanche. The prairie is red with the blood of my brave men, and my belt is without scalps. You promised much, and you have given me nothing, and now why have you sent for me?"

"Who can tell what the future may bring forth?" replied Elwood. "It is not my fault if you met Hardin and were beaten."

"Why was not my brother there with his men, to strike beside Single Hand and drive the white rangers into the gulches? My brother is not fond of fighting himself, but he is willing to let his red brothers fight for him."

Conscious guilt for a moment reddened the cheek of the outlaw, for he knew that the chief had spoken truly, and that the Indians had been sent back on the old trail simply that they might meet the rangers. But the native assurance of the bad man came to his aid.

"The chief wrongs his brother," he said. "How could I know which way the rangers would come? They might have met me—they did meet you. It is in the hands of fate."

As he spoke, the rattle of arms was heard far away to the west.

"Fighting is going on in that direction, chief. We must leave this place, but first let me show you the offering I have to give you."

The chief followed him into the cabin, and he pointed to the sinking women.

"They are yours," he said; "all I ask of you is that they may never return to Texas."

"It is well," cried the chief, eagerly. "My brother has redeemed all, and Single Hand believes him a true man. The white women will prepare to follow the steps of Single Hand."

"Away with them, chief, and we will follow, for the rangers are not far away!" cried Duke, impatiently.

The chief advanced to seize upon the frightened women, when Coral, almost beside herself with grief, ran in and presented a pistol to the head of the Comanche.

"Stand back!" she cried. "Lay a finger upon one of them again and you are dead."

"What do you mean, Coral?" hissed Elwood. "Death! do you know what you are trying to do? Have you lost your senses?"

"They shall not go with that brutal savage," she replied, in the same fierce tone; "nothing save death shall drive me from them."

He sprung upon her, seized her fiercely by the wrist and wrenched the weapon from her hand. At the same moment came the charging cheer of the rangers, who, guided by Jim Blanchard, whose departure had been really to warn the whites, poured in upon the astonished outlaws, who, caught like rats in a trap, were beaten down, man by man.

The sudden onslaught had taken them all by surprise, and they were swept away before the rush of the now furious rangers. Contesting every inch of ground, Duke Elwood and Single Hand, with a few faithful followers, hard pressed by Ned Clayton, Captain Hardin, Prairie Joe and Jim Blanchard, were forced back to the door of the hut, where the women were concealed. In that moment Coral showed that her love for her husband was above all else, for she

sprung in between him and the weapons raised against his life.

"Ned Clayton, as we were once friends, spare him. Blanchard, Evans, save his life! He is beaten; he will give up."

Single Hand saw that all was over, and heaving up his mighty ax, rushed headlong into the midst of the foe, who parted like water before him, and then closed in on every side. A moment of wild commotion, weapons flashed, blows were struck, and Single Hand lay dead in the midst of the crowd, with three dead rangers at his feet.

Duke Elwood sprang back, a pistol in each hand, just as Lillian and her mother appeared in the doorway. Brought to bay, the savage nature of the man came out, and shouting a fierce defiance, he caught Lillian by the arm and placed the pistol at her head, but Coral, striking it from his hand, pushed Lillian back into the house, and placed herself before the door.

"Stand back, all of you!" screamed the desperate man. "You know me now, James Hardin. I am Duke Elwood, your own cousin, whom you robbed of all that makes life sweet. I had my revenge in my hands, and she dares to thwart me."

Even as he spoke he snatched a small dagger from Coral's belt, and struck her a quick, fierce blow, aimed at her heart. She sunk gasping to the earth, the blood bubbling from the wound. Then placing the point of the keen weapon against his own breast, he drove it sharply home, and with a gasping sigh, fell dead at the feet of his bleeding wife.

"Back, all of you!" she cried, in a feeble voice. "Leave me with my dead. He killed me, you say; let it be so. I would rather die by his hand than live without him."

She dragged herself forward a little and looked down upon the dead face. There was actually a smile upon it, and he looked grand in his repose. She never moved, but spoke to that dead man in tones of loving tenderness, which went to every heart.

"Lie you there, my dear one, cold and dead? Wait on the border of the river, and my soul will join yours in your flight to that far-off land. Lillian, come to me."

Lillian bent beside her, weeping as if her heart would break.

"I loved you, sweet one," she said, "and I died to save your life. Kiss a poor, lost woman, and pray for the rest of my unhappy soul. Ned Clayton, to you we owe all this, but I cannot blame you."

"I would have died to save your life," sobbed Ned. "I never looked for this sad end. Can we not do something? You may not be so badly hurt."

"I shall be dead in a moment more. Lay me with my husband in this sequestered place, where no one will come to disturb our rest. Farewell. Husband, I come to you."

She threw herself upon the dead form of the man she had loved, and with the effort her life passed away.

They laid this erring pair under the green turf of the little glade, and not one in the wild band but mourned for the beautiful wife of Duke Elwood.

Of his past, little need be said. He was a cousin of James Hardin, who had loved Maria Lascelle before she became the wife of Hardin. A man of rare parts, but who led a life of riot, he forged his father's name, and at last killed a friend in a bar-room fight. After that he fled to Texas, at that time the city of refuge to all criminals; and from that time his friends had not heard of him. When he went away, he breathed fierce invectives against his cousin, by whose means he had been detected in the crime of forgery, and swore revenge when they met.

James Hardin never had hated him—had given his evidence most unwillingly, but this was nothing to the monomaniac, and when they met in Texas the dormant passion of the man was again aroused, and he began, through the medium of Ned Clayton, that train of events which terminated so tragically for him.

Black Feather, trusting to his action in favor of the whites, came into the camp and asked permission to carry away the body of his father, which had been protected from mutilation by Ned Clayton, and the giant form was borne away to be buried amid the graves of the old-time chiefs of the Comanche. The rangers, after burying the dead and searching out the concealed treasure of the band, directed by Jim Blanchard, rode back to the desolated ranch, after sending a party under Blanchard to find the woman and care for them.

The treasure which was found went far to recompense Captain Hardin for his loss, and

before a month had passed, the family, who had been living with a friend some miles away, moved into the new house, where Ned Clayton was again domesticated, overseeing every thing.

Jim Blanchard became a sub-overseer, and his pretty wife lived in the great house and was made much of by Lillian.

The rest of the women scattered to various parts, but old Jinny was found and installed in a place of trust, in the new house, where she glorified the houses of Lascelle and Hardin to her dying day.

Four years passed. Ned Clayton was no longer overseer for Captain Hardin, but had a ranch of his own, further up the valley, with Jack Evans as overseer. He has grown into a fine, robust man, with a stunning mustache and imperial, and is doted on by all the girls along the Rio Grande. But, he has been true to his first love, and this year, when the harvest was yellow and the fields groaning with riches, he took to his home a fair young bride, for whose sake he had done and suffered so much—Lillian Hardin.

THE END.

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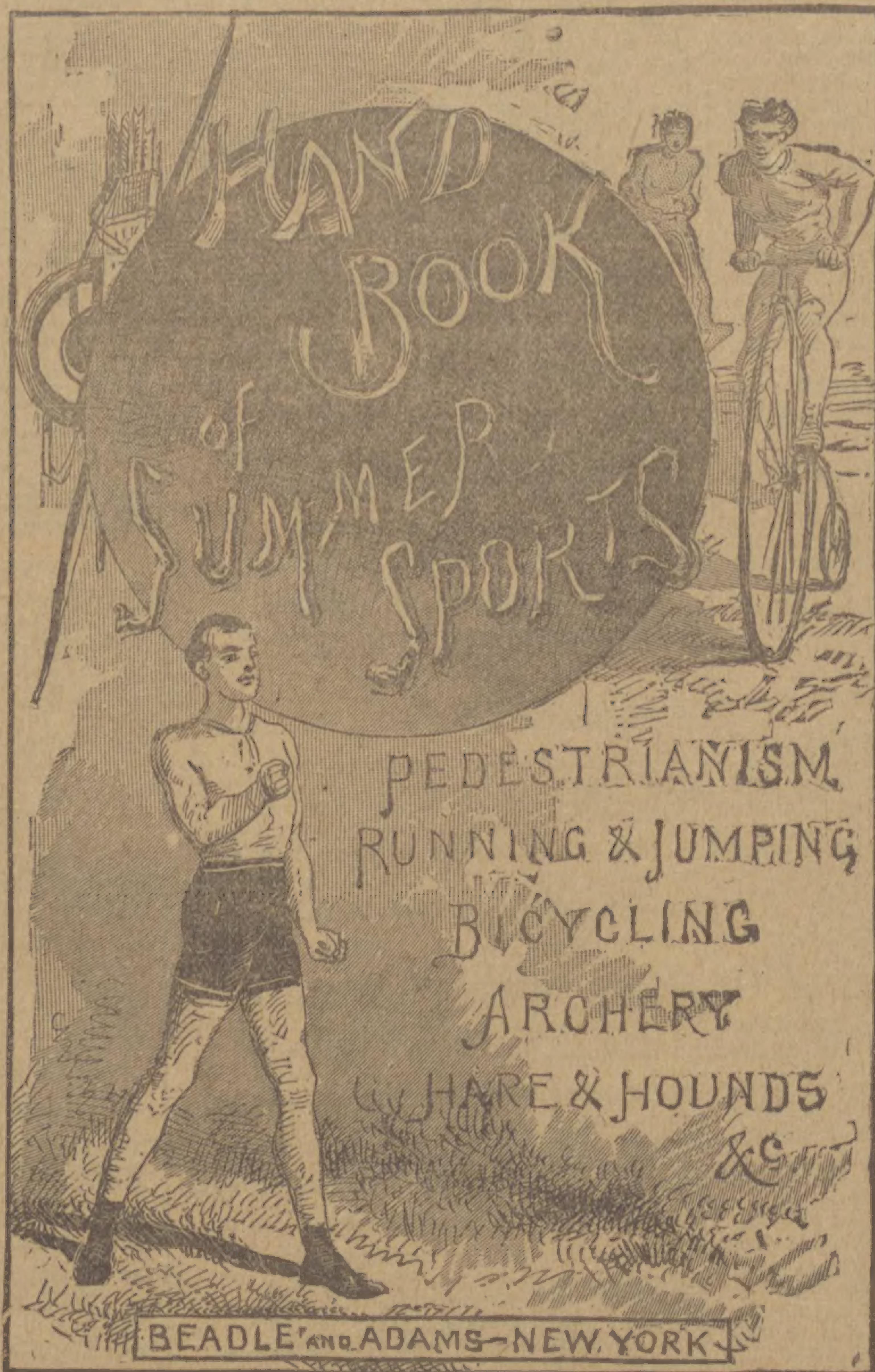
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